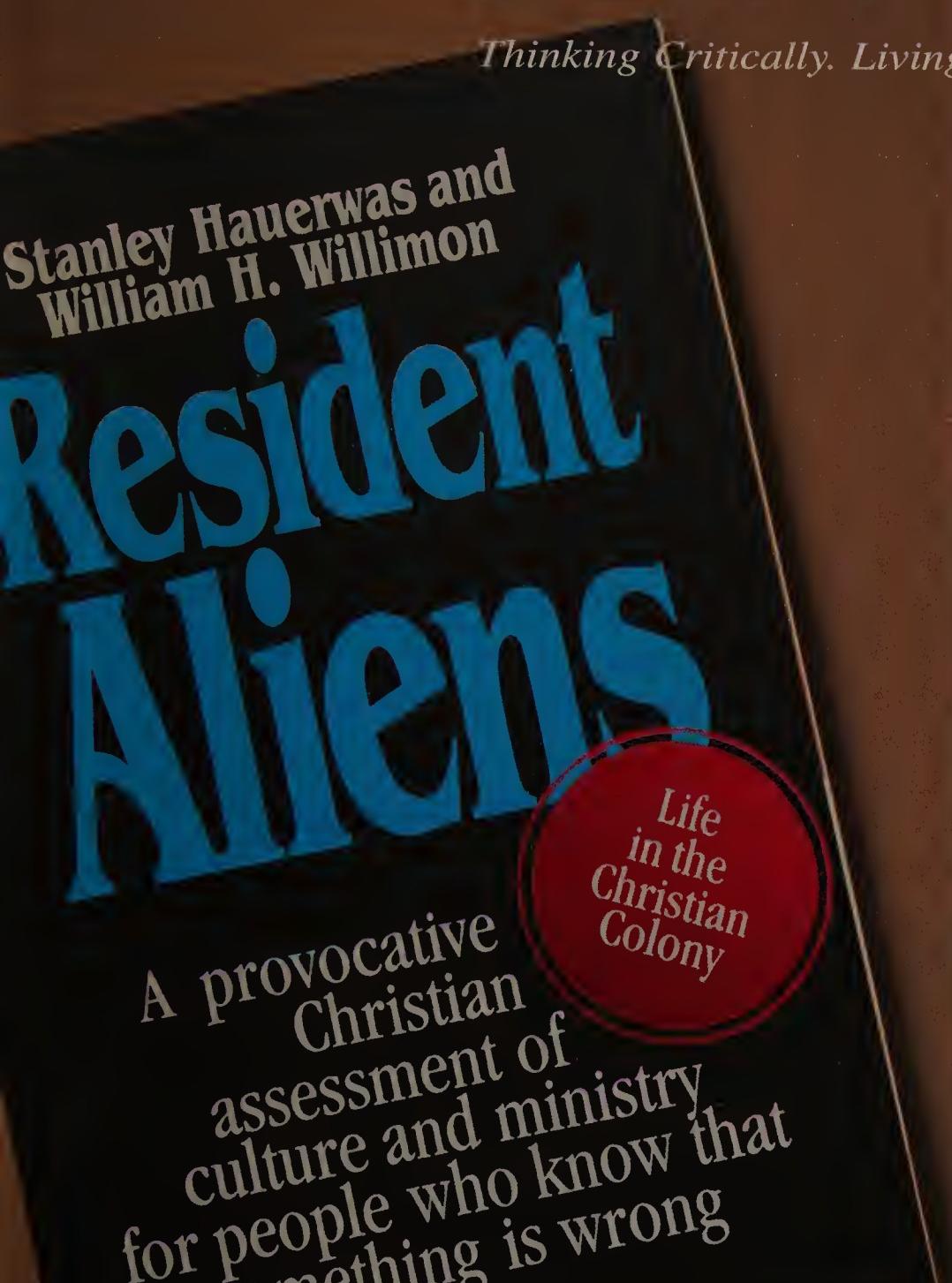


# THE Christian CENTURY

*Thinking Critically. Living Faithfully.*



## REFLECTIONS AFTER 25 YEARS

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

Brian D. McLaren

Willie James Jennings

Jennifer M. McBride

Miguel De La Torre

Gary Dorrien

James K. A. Smith

Robin Lovin

Nancy Bedford

Debra Dean Murphy

Christian Scharen

PLUS a reply from

Stanley Hauerwas

and William H. Willimon

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Read **Stephanie Paulsell** @  
**Faith Matters**



**“We need places to pray as if someone were listening, to study as if we might learn something worth writing on our hearts, to join with others in service as if the world might be transformed. Churches are places to learn to practice, with others, a continual conversion of life, a permanent openness to change.”**

(from “Soul experiments,” Faith Matters)



**THE  
Christian  
CENTURY**

by John M. Buchanan

## Kids of summer

THE BASEBALL SEASON is winding down, and Chicago's two professional teams will end the season with some of the worst records in Major League Baseball. Yet Chicago still went a little crazy over baseball this summer, because the boys of Jackie Robinson West, a team from the far South Side, won the Little League national championship. This team of 11- and 12-year-old African Americans captivated the city and the nation with their spirit and poise. They were celebrated on the front pages of local newspapers and given a victory parade through the city.

JRW played its championship games against the backdrop of events in Ferguson, Missouri, where an unarmed black teenager was shot six times by a police officer and a tone-deaf and unresponsive police department withheld information and confronted protesters wearing full military battle gear. In the face of that story, there was joy in seeing African-American young men from a disadvantaged neighborhood plagued by violence showing the world their talents.

Behind the success of the JRW team is a significant history. The JRW league was founded in 1971 by the late Joseph Haley, who wanted to bring youth baseball to the South Side. The program grew from one team to a league that now has 38 teams. The goal of JRW all along, said Haley's son, was not to win championships but to impart leadership skills to children through the work of dedicated volunteers and parents.

The number of African Americans participating in Little League has declined by half since the 1980s, and they account for only 8 percent of players. The presence of blacks in Major League Baseball has also dropped sharply. There are several reasons for this. Football and basketball offer college scholarships that are too enticing to pass up, and they offer big paydays for those who make it to the professional level. Furthermore, as Wayne G. McDonnell Jr. writes in *Forbes*, "The costs of playing competitive baseball today at the amateur level are exorbitant due to travel requirements, tournament fees, uniforms, equipment and playing on multiple teams."

But that isn't the final word. Programs like Jackie Robinson West, the Little League Urban Initiative, Major League Baseball's Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities program, and the Urban Youth Academy have increased African-American participation in baseball. And as JRW showed, when people are given resources and opportunity, great things can happen.

The boys of Jackie Robinson West have reminded us of the hopefulness built into the nature of baseball. They have also shown how hope can be fostered in inner-city neighborhoods. We might best respond to the example of Jackie Robinson West by working to bring caring, energy, and creative new beginnings—and yes, also baseball—to all children.

## WHO'S BLOGGING AT CHRISTIANCENTURY.ORG?

Carol Howard Merritt surveys the religious landscape at her blog **Tribal Church**

Steve Thorngate blogs about public life and culture at **In the World**

CCblogs highlights posts from the CENTURY's network of independent bloggers

Various bloggers write for **Blogging Toward Sunday** (on the lectionary) and  
**Then and Now** (on U.S. religious history)

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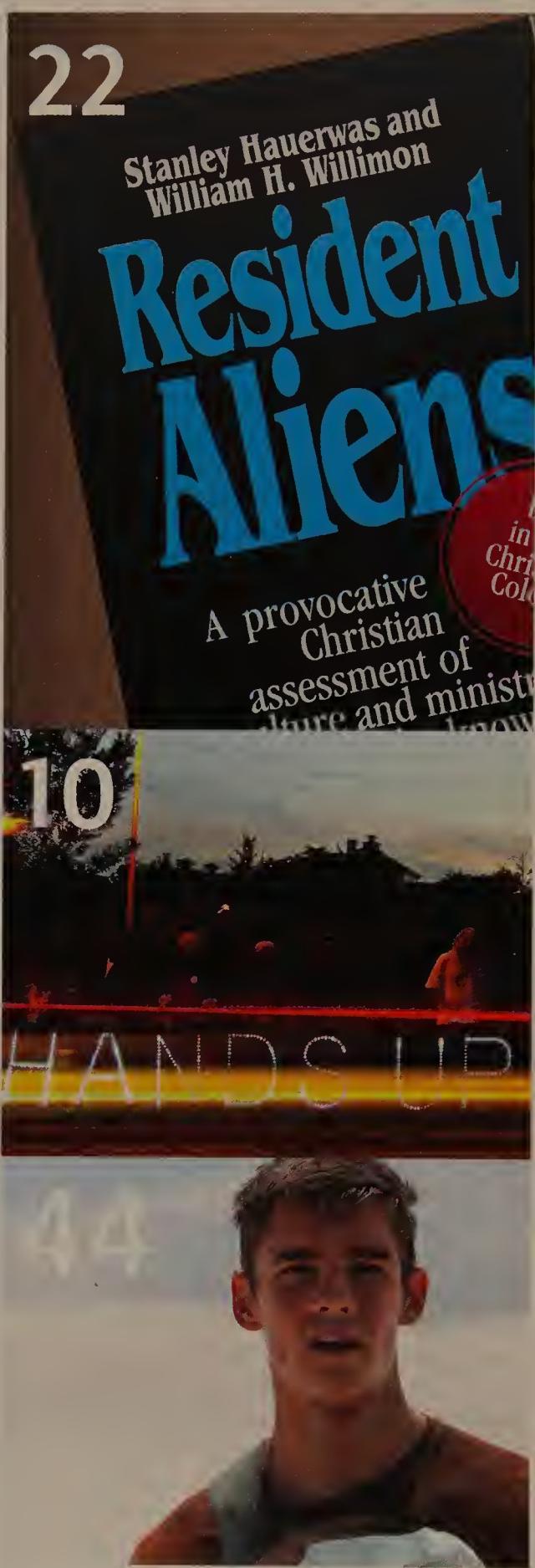
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## Learning from parables

I always enjoy Amy-Jill Levine's insights. However, as a Christian pastor I have never held or preached the negative view of Judaism she critiques ("A parable and its baggage," Sept. 3). She listed many bad interpretations by Christians, but I know of several others who share her interpretation. I think that more recent Christian scholarship on the parables (and other teaching of Jesus) takes the Jewish context and the simple fact that Jesus was a Jew much more seriously.

Several of my United Methodist colleagues see Jesus as not trying to correct Judaism as much as correct and reform the way it was lived out in his own time—much like the prophets before him—and that scribes and Pharisees, while not bad people, had become entangled with and influenced by politics and the wealthy—not unlike far too many in the Christian church today.

*Michael Redmond  
christiancentury.org comment*

It seems, then, that the elder brother is not offended by the father's great generosity toward the younger son because it is unexpected; rather the elder brother is pulling a Jonah—angry because the father reacts as one would expect love to react, as God always acts. And although the elder brother is perhaps something of a stand-in for the "Pharisees and teachers of the law" in the passage, who object to Jesus hanging with sinners, he is not a stand-in for the Jews. And for us, he is not even a stand-in for the Pharisees or any other "others." He represents all those who have heard and known of the grace of God but who have not yet gotten it—have not yet had our systems converted to God's metrics. That's any of us, on any given day. How hopeful, then, that the father doesn't scold, let alone excommunicate the older son, but patiently explains reality to him—again—and invites him to join in the joy.

*Charles Johnson  
christiancentury.org comment*

Many thanks to Amy-Jill Levine for many new insights. I am honored that she refers to my work on the Luke 15 parables, published in *A Feminist Companion to Luke*. However, her comment suggests that I discussed the parable of the father and two sons with Yemenite women. I want to make it clear that I interviewed Arab Christian women immigrants to the United States, who had grown up with the parables and in a culture arguably closer to the world of Luke 15 than ours.

My field research on Yemeni women, all of whom were Muslim, was intended to illuminate (and correct) some of the cultural models being used to understand family and gender dynamics in the biblical world. A possible source of this misunderstanding (that I had interviewed Yemenite women about Luke 15) may be David Gowler's *What Are They Saying about the Parables?*—which says, "LaHurd rereads the parables through the eyes of Arab Christians in Yemen."

There are virtually no Arab Christians in Yemen, which is close to 100 percent Muslim, with only a few remaining Jews and a sprinkling of ex-pat Christians, and those Christians from the Horn of Africa who are related by marriage to Yemeni Muslims.

*Carol Schersten LaHurd  
Lutheran School of Theology at  
Chicago  
Chicago, Ill.*

### Life after prison . . .

As a prison chaplain, I liked it that Martin Copenhaver's book excerpt "Do you see this prisoner?" (Sept. 3) talked about a graduate program in ministry offered in the prison but didn't make that the primary focus. I liked the focus on George, the guy who enrolled in seminary after he got out. So many prisoners have a dream of getting out and helping youth or others at their local church or entering the ministry. In all

cases, I tell them to make a strong connection, or use the one they may already have, even if it's through a family member or friend, to a local church and start preparing in ministry with that connection in the lead when they get released.

Lots of prison TV shows and movies focus on the slamming doors, the security, and the life sentences, but life sentences are not the norm. Most of those in the incarcerated population are expecting to be released. Communities, churches, and helping agencies will be called on to care for some of their needs. That's the fact most people miss in failing to "see this prisoner."

*John Swisher  
Boonville, Mo.*

### Higher standards . . .

I've often been disappointed by the failure of the church (in general, not just one particular denomination) to deal honestly and openly with its own sins, especially related to sexuality and gender ("Theology and misconduct: The case of John Howard Yoder," by David Cramer and others, Aug. 20). Over the past several years, I've become increasingly disgusted hearing about several denominations' refusal to deal with abusive clergy and with many Christians' obsessive denouncing of homosexuals and objectification of women. (Even popular pastors like Mark Driscoll are guilty of this.) We as the church are called to hold ourselves to a different standard, but we're better sometimes at holding other people to a higher standard.

I wonder what Yoder's story can teach us about how we handle misbehavior in the church. A first step, I think, is admitting that we're people who follow Christ but aren't Christ ourselves. Showing some repentance, individually and corporately, could go a long way.

*Steve Allman  
christiancentury.org comment*

# The politics of deportation

October 1, 2014

**O**n election day, the Republicans will almost certainly retain control of the House of Representatives. The Democrats may lose the Senate. And 1,000 more undocumented immigrants will be deported.

That's the current daily average, and the Obama administration recently announced that it will wait until after the November midterms to do anything to change this. Previously, the president promised executive action to protect immigrant families, given Congress's failure to take up immigration reform. Now those families will have to wait—and perhaps be deported.

A White House official told the *New York Times* that acting too soon would be unsustainable, even "harmful to the policy itself." Left unsaid: Obama is trying to help Democrats in close Senate races by declining to add fuel to their opponents' fire.

The reaction from pro-immigrant activists has been fierce. They rightly point out the human costs of Obama's decision: thousands of people deported between now and election day, thousands more living in fear that they might be next. Hardworking taxpayers will be kicked out, people whose only crime is coming here. Spouses will be separated and families broken up. Faced with a choice between the welfare of these families and his party's political advantage, Obama chose the politics. People will suffer as a result. And it's far from guaranteed that the administration's implicit claim—that a Democratic Senate is the best chance for lasting immigration reform—will pan out.

But it might, of course. And either way, it's worth noting that this sort of retreat from a worthy cause is a predictable consequence of a political system gone wrong. It's Obama at his least inspiring and most pragmatic, letting down vulnerable families now in favor of helping his party possibly do more good later. But it's also a symptom of what's wrong with Washington.

Our political system is as broken as our immigration system. A June poll found that 62 percent of Americans—including 51 percent of Republicans—favor a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Yet Congress remains unmoved. The House, after all, doesn't answer to national majorities; population patterns and gerrymandering have left it disproportionately beholden to right-wing constituencies. Whatever working consensus might be reached in the Senate is kept at bay by the filibuster. Legislators risk far more by defying their own party's hardliners than they do by ignoring the will of the people generally. And they have even less incentive to cooperate with an opposition president. Obama's left choosing whether or not to take controversial executive action where Congress has shirked its duty.

For now, he's choosing not to. It's a devastating development for those immigrant families it will affect directly. It's also a disappointing one for anyone who still thinks Obama has the power to transcend partisan politics. He doesn't—and in recent years he has behaved less like a reconciler in chief and more like a tough party leader in a broken, ultrapartisan age. But Obama didn't break our politics. And it isn't his fault that Congress lacks a compelling incentive to pass immigration reform most Americans want.

**Americans want immigration reform,  
but Congress is unmoved.**

# CENTURY marks

## WHERE MOST NEEDED:

Pediatrician Alan Jamison, who was in Liberia when the Ebola virus broke out, treated as many patients as he could until the country slipped into chaos. Then his sponsoring organization pulled him out. But Jamison wants to go back. "This is where the need is," he said. "This is my calling." This epidemic has killed more than 2,000 people and sickened nearly 4,000 in five West African nations. It cannot be stamped out unless enough health-care workers like Jamison are willing to confront it directly (AP).

## NOT MY BUSINESS:

A video seen by tens of millions of Chinese is causing a national debate about Chinese character and personal responsibility. The video shows a foreigner fainting on a Shanghai subway train earlier this summer. All the

passengers around him scattered; no one came to his aid. When the train stopped at the next station, hundreds of people rushed out, nearly trampling over each other. One Chinese commented: "Everyone is hoping someone else will take care of him. . . . No one wants to be dragged into things that aren't their business" (NPR, September 1).

## GOOD BUSINESS PRACTICES:

S. Truett Cathy, founder of the Chick-fil-A restaurant chain, died last month. He believed that Christian principles didn't conflict with good business practices. He has kept the restaurants closed on Sundays and encouraged stores to become involved in their communities. The business, worth \$5.5 billion, has given \$68 million to 700 educational and charitable organizations. The company

came under fire in 2012 when Dan Cathy, president, made antigay marriage statements and was accused of supporting groups fighting same-sex marriage. Chick-fil-A subsequently stopped funding such groups (*Christian Science Monitor*, September 8).

**HISTORY HAUNTS US:** Cotton was king in the 19th century, and the industry was dependent upon slavery. It wasn't only southern plantation owners who reaped its benefits. Northerners and Europeans created a worldwide textile industry on the backs of slave labor, and they lent money to plantation owners to buy more slaves. We are still living with the legacy of that slavery, says Edward E. Baptist, author of the recently released *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. Part of the legacy is that white households have almost \$15 worth of wealth for every dollar held by African-American households (CNN, September 7).

**TAKE UP YOUR BED:** Emma Sulkowicz, a Columbia University student, is carrying her mattress everywhere she goes as part of her senior visual arts thesis. Two years ago she was attacked and raped in her dorm room. Sulkowicz sees this performance art project as a way to show the burden sexual assault survivors carry everyday. Last year three women reported assaults by the same person; all three cases were dismissed by the university (*Time*, September 2).

**CONFFLICT OVER:** Class warfare in America is over, says Nick Carnes, and the well-to-do have won. The result is that the less well-to-do are being shut out of the decision-making process.

© PETER C. VEY / THE NEW YORKER COLLECTION / THE CARTOON BANK



"It's O.K. for now, but ultimately I'd like to work somewhere other than a post-apocalyptic world."

Very few working-class Americans get into government, even at the state level. Running for office is so expensive that only wealthier Americans aspire to elected office. Once in office they reflect their own class. "Social safety net programs are stingier, business regulations are flimsier, and tax policies are more regressive than they would be if our politicians came from the same mix of classes as the people they represent," says Carnes (*Vox*, September 3).

**SHUT OUT:** The U.S. Department of Justice has sued a small Minneapolis suburb for denying Muslims permission to create an Islamic center. The government said the municipality of St. Anthony Village is violating Muslims' right to freedom of worship. The center was proposed for a building located in an area zoned for assemblies. The municipality said it denied the request because there is a limited amount of industrial space for job creation (Reuters).

**OVER THE TOP:** Richard Dawkins, militant atheist and evolutionary biologist, was recently asked by a woman what she should do if her fetus has Down syndrome. He said: "Abort it and try again. It would be immoral to bring it into the world if you have the choice." It was not only abortion opponents who reacted negatively to Dawkins's advice. One pro-choice advocate said that Dawkins was turning a choice into an obligation (*The Week*, September 12).

**CHURCH AND STATE:** Evidence is mounting that some Russian Orthodox clergy have been aiding the efforts of pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine. One pro-Ukrainian editor charged that priests at an Orthodox church in Slovyansk, Ukraine, blessed the rebel fighters and let the rebels store ammunition on church property. Patriarch Kirill I, head of the Orthodox Church based in Moscow, suggested that the Ukrainian military actions against the Russian-backed rebels is an attempt to "overpower the canonical Orthodox Church." The rebels temporarily took over a large Protestant church and murdered

**"Like Jim Foley before him, Steve's life stood in sharp contrast to those who murdered him so brutally. They make the absurd claim that they kill in the name of religion, but it was Steven, his friends say, who deeply loved the Islamic world. His killers try to claim that they defend the oppressed, but it was Steven who traveled across the Middle East risking his life to tell the story of Muslim men and women demanding justice and dignity."**

— President Obama on the beheading of Steve Sotloff by Islamic State militants [RNS]

**"I [heart] sex. —God"**

— A billboard in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, posted by a local church whose pastor plans to preach a series of sermons on sex (Fox 32 News Chicago, August 28)

four evangelicals who belonged to another church in town (*New York Times*, September 6).

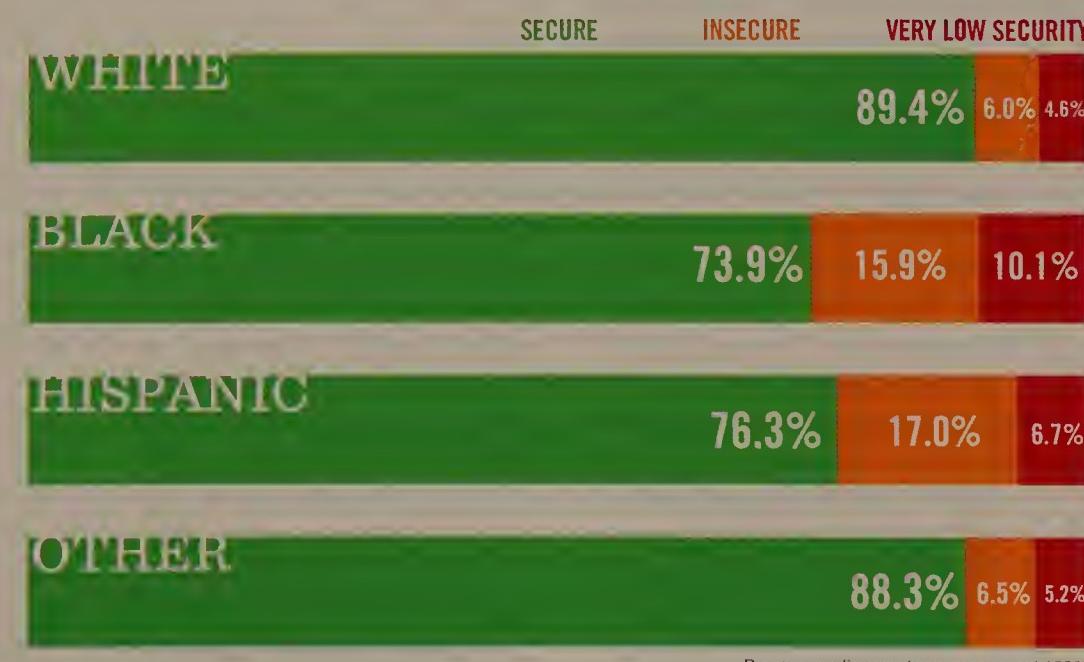
**IRONY:** Plans are under way to turn Hitler's birth home in Austria into a museum called "House of Responsibility." Since World War II the site has served as a library, bank, school, home for the disabled, and a pub. It has also been a site for neo-Nazi pilgrimages on Hitler's birthday (*Tablet*, September 2).

**WAR PROTEST:** A Michigan man has won his legal battle to have "WAR SUX" stamped on his license plate. The state of Michigan argued that the phrase includes a sexual connotation that is inappropriate for children to see. A U.S. district judge ruled that the word is now being used as slang for something objectionable. The judge ruled that the state maintains the right to limit license plates that are indecent or offensive (MLive.com, September 3).

## FOOD SECURITY

SOURCE: USDA, 2013 FIGURES

Experiencing **food insecurity** means that at some point in the past year one's household had trouble feeding all its members. **Very low security** means that people missed meals or cut back on consumption because they don't have enough money to buy food.



Fear and hope in Ferguson

# Marching into danger

by Shannon Craigo-Snell

I WAS WALKING with a group of clergy in Ferguson, Missouri, singing, "We Shall Overcome." As we finished the verse that says, "We are not afraid today," I turned to the person next to me and whispered, "That's a lie. I am afraid."

I knew that we would encounter the police at some point in the evening, but nothing prepared me for the sheer number of officers. We had gathered at dinnertime in the parking lot of a grocery store miles away from the protest site. By the time there were four of us, there were also four squad cars of officers telling us to leave.

We drove to the local high school, parked our cars, and began walking to

the county prosecutor's office in Clayton to present a letter with a list of demands, including an expedited grand jury process and the recusal of county prosecutor Bob McCulloch. Although we were far from the site of Michael Brown's death, our route was guarded by scores of heavily armed officers. Squad cars drove slowly beside us, and there were SWAT teams and barricades.

We were not being guarded in the sense of being protected but guarded against, as if we were an extreme threat. As a white Presbyterian woman, I had never experienced being policed in this way. It was unnerving. Could a couple hundred clergy walking together really pose such a threat? We prayed together,

then delivered our list of demands to an officer. It was a single sheet of paper wilting in the humid heat, but the officer acted as if it might explode and hesitated to even take hold of it.

In Ferguson we gathered in a church that is home base and sanctuary for the protesters. One folding table held a jumble of first-aid supplies. The other held makeshift gear: bottles of water, spray bottles of solution for washing tear gas out of eyes, paper masks, and swim goggles for eye protection.

The leaders are a group of twenty-somethings thoughtfully engaging in nonviolent protests. They wanted us to know what we would encounter on the march. They told us not to make any sudden movements. If we carried a water bottle, we should hold it up high so the police could see what it was. If we took gear (a mask or goggles), we should not let it be seen until it was needed, or we would be targeted. They were protective of us newbies; one of the young men asked me if I had a group to walk with. He did not want me to go out alone.

Then these young protesters—I kid you not—prepared to face hundreds of heavily armed officers by reciting poetry. Those leaders were the fiercest hope I have ever seen. I was humbled by such hope, amazed by it, and protective of these young people who embodied it.

The clergy were divided into teams with a trained organizer for each team. We memorized each other's names, agreed to be responsible for one another, and wrote an emergency number on our skin with a purple Sharpie. Our team captain asked us what level of danger and violence we were willing to

## Creation

Obvious of course, now and in the beginning:  
God is not a perfectionist. Good at detail for sure,  
and drama, but lacking the  
compulsion to get every piece of  
punctuation in its proper place, ever.  
And forever forgetting the finishing touches:  
a proper frame, that final proofreading.

Tempting to be critical of such sloppiness,  
all those excesses and omissions. For instance,  
surely there is too much sadness to go around,  
more than what's necessary for lessons and poetry.

But I don't mean there is no serious business here.  
Only that there is something else on the canvas,  
an art in line and color, a splash of mystery,  
a priority of passion perhaps,  
well beyond the right answer and its rush of applause,  
something still seeping into our soil.

Janeal Turnbull Ravndal



© Light Brigading (Creative Commons)

face. Would we leave when the tear gas started? I asked: Why we would willingly walk into tear gas? He said: “To get the young people out. They will keep going, so some of us go back in to pull them out.”

When we reached the protest area the street was closed to traffic and the parking lots were filled with media people

was the call-and-response “Who’s in charge?” “God’s in charge!” The clergy present that night represented a diverse assortment of faiths and no doubt held very different views of who God is and what it means for God to be “in charge.” Yet in this moment we could agree. We could counter the false claim to authority made by military-grade weaponry. We

Can I walk with you?” I’m not proud of my reaction: I didn’t want him to walk with us. He had his red T-shirt pulled up over his head, so he was effectively masked. A number of the protesters did this, and I suspected it was makeshift protection from tear gas. I didn’t want him walking next to me because I was afraid his presence would spark a violent response.

Then the man turned, and I saw on his torso a phone number scrawled in purple Sharpie—he was one of the youth from the church, one of the young leaders that I’d been eager to protect. I had gone from hoping that my clergy stole would protect this young man to not wanting him near me, since I did not want the protection of my stole, and my white skin and gray hair, to be disrupted by his presence. Hope in the church turned to fear on the street so quickly.

Hope is always frightening. It opens us to disappointment. Hope is frightening in another way for those of us who are privileged in the current state of affairs. I want a better world but am afraid to give up the security I have in this one. Hope threatens me, even in its abundant promise. For me, part of the challenge is not to fear hope itself. cc

## Hope is frightening. I want a better world but am afraid to give up the security I have in this one.

and hundreds of police officers. We were allowed to protest as long as we stayed on the sidewalk, kept moving, and did nothing that could be interpreted as aggression. At one point a kindly officer gave us a minute before asking us to move along. “If I make an exception for you,” he said, “I have to make an exception for everybody.” The clear implication was that he would let us stop if he could. I was torn between enjoying his favor and realizing that it was this distinction that I was there to protest. Did we seem harmless because of our clergy collars or because some of us were white?

We marched, sang, and did call-and-response chants—“Hands up! Don’t shoot!” For me the most powerful chant

could stand against the pernicious falsehood that black life matters less than white life.

**A**s the night wore on, my fear deepened. Every night so far the police had responded with tear gas, flash grenades, or rubber bullets. What would it be tonight? We passed one person who seemed intoxicated and another who appeared to be mentally ill. Most marchers were peaceful, but it would take only one wrong move to set off the officers. After 11 p.m., the police held yellow sticks as well as guns. Sticks aren’t as dangerous as guns, but they made me nervous.

At this point a young black man came by and said, “Are you a group?

Shannon Craig-Snell teaches theology at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and is author of *The Empty Church: Theater, Theology, and Bodily Hope* (Oxford University Press).

# The poor door

by Heidi Neumark

**THE SKY-HIGH** cost of housing here in Manhattan just hit a new low. Extell, one of the city's largest developers, has been accepted for the Inclusionary Housing Program. This means that the company is allowed to construct larger buildings with generous subsidies and tax breaks as long as its plans include a certain percentage of low-income apartments. Apparently the only way to get developers to do what they should do is by appealing to their bottomless self-interest. As if to underscore that there is no good will involved, Extell's application has a provision that the people residing in the more affordable apartments would have their own entryway—in a back alley behind the building.

According to a company spokesman, "No one ever said that the goal was full integration of these populations." Well, someone might have said that—like Isaiah or Jesus—but what did they know about 21st-century New York City real estate? "I think it's unfair to expect very high-income homeowners who paid a fortune to live in their building to have to be in the same boat as low-income renters, who are very fortunate to live in a new building in a great neighborhood." But how great is a neighborhood when some residents wish that others were invisible?

Predictably, news of the poor door has ignited flames of outrage. But they'll die down. The poor doors in luxury buildings are just the latest manifestation of what goes on every day. Our systems of health care, education, immigration, and criminal justice all have their poor doors in the back alleys of edifices built for the more privileged.

As part of a mainline church I join the disgust over apartment buildings with separate entrances, and yet the truth is

that most of our congregations have front-door people and side-door people, and the latter are usually poorer. In many congregations the members enter through the main door and the food pantry patrons enter through a side door. We don't do really well with multicultural ministries, but transformative multiclass communities are even rarer.

Of course, not every door needs to lead to the altar. We serve our neighbors

the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion . . . comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring." Many churches still shy away from this work of structural change. At

## Most congregations have front-door people and side-door people.

with no explicit or implied evangelistic pressure. On the other hand, a person living in poverty who comes into our churches may look around on a Sunday morning and feel out of place. What would need to happen to change that? In the new Extell apartments the wealthy have the river views and perks such as gym and pool use in their building. Those who use the poor door will be denied entrance into those facilities. We value our sacraments as much more than perks, yet even if we wish it weren't so, there's often a class-based separation between those who enjoy these treasures in our sanctuaries and those who do not.

Most churches I know are really good at serving others, and that ministry is indispensable for followers of Jesus. In recent years community organizing has become recognized as an important extension of ministry that allows us to move from social service to social change. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it: "On the one hand we are called to play

best, it has side-door status: money flows into Good Samaritan ministries that stop short of larger transformations.

**H**aving served in urban ministry for over 30 years, I see our attention shifting away from planting churches in areas of poverty. In a time of economic struggle many urban churches have had to close their doors—both front and side. It's possible to conclude that our past efforts were ineffective and created dependency. But every pastor I know who has worked in such ministries talks about lives changed for the better and leaders who were nurtured because the church was there with open doors. I fear we are giving up on such places.

Some of the most creative church starts today are what we call *emergent* communities. The ones that get the most attention are doing wonderful and essential work, especially in reaching people who have felt alienated from the church. Yet many of these people are the disaffected children of the demographic

we've always served. We need more of these communities, but we also need to take some of that out-of-the-box vision and focus it on addressing the prevailing poor-door reality of our church.

Whenever I visit our congregation's vice president and her family of four, I sit on the chair facing the lower bunk of their bed; the space is so tight that our knees touch. The parents sleep on the bottom bunk and the daughters (in college and high school) share the top. They live in a building where families of Mexican immigrants are squeezed into single-room cubicles without kitchen or closet and use a bathroom in the corridor with dozens of other people. This building sits in the shadow of a gleaming high-rise where the penthouse sold for millions. When I say, "in the shadow," I mean on the same block, in eyesight of public housing projects and rent-stabilized middle-income apartments.

As a church in the middle of this diversity, we are trying to be open to the ways that God is gathering our fragmented lives together with a special focus on those our city pushes aside—the poor, the homeless, the undocumented, and the mentally ill. We feel called to use our space and the community God gathers here to build connections among those disconnected one from another. Our Latina support group cooks arroz con pollo for the homeless LGBTQ youth in our shelter. One morning a week after the shelter residents put their beds away and head off for school or internships or jobs, our basement becomes a safe space for immigrant workers to discuss labor violations with lawyers and organizers. Some of them attend our church. And some members of our church who patronize the surrounding restaurants now boycott the ones that treat their workers unjustly and prod the owners to embrace ethical labor practices. We eat at one table on Sunday, and that compels us to seek the abundance of justice at all tables.

This ministry is made possible by our location, but it is by no means obvious. It requires ongoing intentionality, prayer, and patience. As I write, the children in our summer day camp are singing a song about Jonah in the whale: "Lord, I'm a lit-

tle bit afraid; No, make that very much afraid." The children of privilege are singing with the children who dwell in nearby shelters, housing projects, and immigrant cubicles. We are getting ready for the end to all that divides us, the day when all shall be well. Like Jonah we often resist our mission, we doubt and fear, we whine, we are miserly with the mercy we depend on. We get up to try again.

A church member living in supportive housing for those dealing with mental illness came by this week for a scheduled prayer session. Every Sunday she arrives for worship with an impossibly long list of friends to pray for, in extraordinary detail, and we made a deal that she would pick three per Sunday and our prayer group would take on the rest. Due to vacations, illness, and work schedules, this week's prayer group was down to just Susan and

me. She once lived on the street, and her prayers always include a number of homeless friends. Sometimes I get impatient with the length and minutiae of her prayers, as if I had something more important to do than join her in attending to the assembled souls she honors with her petitions. Then she looked up and said, "The homeless are seen as part of the landscape and scenery of New York, like pigeons. They are thought of as *its*." Susan will never be guilty of that. We are richer because she brings her prayers and her wisdom through the front doors each Sunday.

It's easy to jump on the outrage bandwagon over these latest poor doors in New York City, but it's better to listen to prophets like Susan and channel our energies into the labor another prophet called "repairing the breach." Wherever we live and minister, opportunities await. **cc**

## Sunday morning

Standing at the window,  
I let fall a book of American sermons

when I see my neighbor  
washing his Honda in the June sunshine

and across the street,  
an old woman catechizing her roses.

On the radio  
a disk jockey affirms his faith in Virgin Records,

though he himself is a separatist  
who mostly worships at independent shrines.

I switch stations to hear  
a scholar trying to describe the color purple:

it cannot be done, he finally admits,  
though he calls it the existential center.

Carrying flatbread and coffee,  
I abandon the house

for the sidewalk, where a block away  
two kids are playing with a garden sprinkler.

They dance in rainbows,  
free, it seems, of all catastrophe.

Heidi Neumark is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Manhattan.

**Mark Jones**

## Billions gain access to clean water

Over the past couple of decades, easier access to clean water has become a reality for a huge portion of the world's population.

According to a publication released by the World Health Organization, an arm of the United Nations that monitors the health and well-being of people around the world, more than 2 billion people have gained access to an improved source of drinking water since 1990.

An "improved" water source is a water source that is likely not to be susceptible to outside contamination, especially by human waste, according to the UN's WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme.

In addition to improved water sources, about 4 billion people have achieved the gold standard in clean water access: clean water piped directly into their homes. That's well over half the world's population.

This extraordinary step toward providing universal access to clean water has been the result of a massive global effort on behalf of governments, philanthropists, and nongovernmental organizations.

[Christian organizations have been part of those efforts. For example, Lutheran World Relief has worked on improving access to clean water through investing in agricultural irrigation, water treatment technologies, sanitation facilities, and watershed protection. For potable water, LWR uses "gravity-flow systems that bring water to household taps; construction of sub-surface dams to increase water tables near bore holes," and other methods, according to its website.]

The Episcopal Relief and Development Clean Water program has also

partnered with local organizations to build wells, piping systems, water stations, rainwater catchment tanks, and other projects, its website states.]

Bruce Gordon, acting coordinator of water, sanitation, hygiene, and health for the WHO, said that the increase in improved water sources has been largely due to accountability. He noted that "countries understand that progress is monitored and the results are available for all to see." He adds that one of the most important parts of moving forward has been the acknowledgment of a fundamental human right to clean water by most of the world's countries.

One of the most important steps toward fulfilling that right came in 1990,

when the UN instituted its Millennium Development Goals, a collection of objectives to be met over a 25-year period. One of the goals the UN hoped to achieve was 88 percent improved drinking water coverage by 2015. This objective was met far ahead of schedule, in 2010, and has been steadily exceeded since then.

Much remains to be done. Even if a water source is free of contaminants, there's still a high risk of contamination—especially from human excrement—after the water has been collected. While most of the world now has access to an improved water source, improved sanitation facilities are still needed in case collected water later



PROGRESS: Afghan children receive fresh water through a UNICEF effort.

becomes contaminated. The MDG target of 75 percent improved sanitation facilities—or actually separating contaminants from drinking water—will likely not be met by the deadline next year. That leaves 2.4 billion people still completely without access to such a facility by 2015.

While governments are largely supportive of efforts to improve sanitation and water availability, many of them rely on NGOs such as Water.org to coordinate and help provide funding for water sanitation and access, especially in poorer countries.

Rosemary Gudelj, senior manager for the Office of the CEO and Public Affairs for Water.org, says that most of the obstacles NGOs face in developing countries are matters of distribution.

"The system remains inefficient, and largely misses the goal of providing relief for those at the base of the economic pyramid in their daily need to secure water," she said.

In short, despite significant progress, clean water isn't getting to everyone: 70 percent of people without access to an improved sanitation facility live in rural areas.

"Governments and service providers have focused on extending access where they can make rapid and cost-effective gains," Gordon said. "In some countries, this has resulted in richer people gaining services at a dramatically faster rate than poor people, increasing inequality."

Gordon added that maintaining the infrastructure already in place is difficult to sustain in poorer countries without outside assistance.

There are ways to help, largely through NGOs. Mary Renwick, director and senior program officer for Winrock International's water innovation program, recommends supporting NGOs with a focus "on the rational and sustainable use of water," including water for bathing and toilets.

"Investing in water and sanitation yields tremendous health and economic benefits," says Gordon. "Every dollar invested in sanitation yields more than \$5 in benefits, by keeping people healthy and productive, and keeping children in school." —Weston Williams, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Christian leaders differ on strikes in Iraq, Syria

While some prominent Christians have called on the United States to take more forceful military action against Islamic extremists in Iraq and Syria, more than 50 leaders of Catholic, Protestant, and other Christian groups wrote an open letter to President Obama asking him to halt U.S. air strikes and pursue solely peaceful means to resolve the conflict.

"While the dire plight of Iraqi civilians should compel the international community to respond in some way, U.S. military action is not the answer," the 53 clergy, theologians, and religious sisters and brothers wrote in the open letter. "Lethal weapons and air strikes will not remove the threat to a just peace in Iraq. As difficult as it might be, in the face of this great challenge, we believe that the way to address the crisis is through long-term investments in supporting inclusive governance and diplomacy, nonviolent resistance, sustainable development, and community-level peace and reconciliation processes."

The signatories note that while Pope Francis recently said it was "licit to stop the unjust aggressor"—referring to the Islamic State, or IS—the pontiff underscored that he was not endorsing bombing or warfare.

"We understand and deeply share the desire to protect people, especially civilians," the leaders wrote. "However, even when tactics of violent force yield a short-term displacement of the adversary's violence, such violence toward armed actors is often self-perpetuating, as the retributive violence that flares up in response will only propitiate more armed intervention in a tit-for-tat escalation without addressing the root causes of the conflict. We see this over and over again."

The signers are Susan T. Henry-Crowe, general secretary, General Board of Church and Society for the United Methodist Church; Gradye Parsons, stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly; and Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, professor of the-

ology at Chicago Theological Seminary, in addition to other academics and other denominational leaders.

The signers argued that many factors contributed to the current volatile mix in the Middle East, including past U.S. political and military campaigns in the region. And they point to the U.S. strikes that helped oust Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011 as an example of how that approach has backfired in the past.

"More bombing will ultimately mean more division, bloodshed, recruitment for extremist organizations, and a continual cycle of violent intervention," they wrote.

The letter writers list eight specific recommendations for their "just peace" agenda, including an arms embargo and financial sanctions on the armed groups.

The letter, dated August 27, stands in contrast to a petition launched earlier in August by more than 50 Christian and Jewish leaders as well as other academics who demanded that Obama sharply escalate military action against Islamic extremists in Iraq. They said that "nothing short of the destruction" of the Islamic State can protect Christians and other religious minorities.

"We further believe that the United States' goal must be more comprehensive than simply clamping a short-term lid on the boiling violence that is threatening so many innocents," they wrote.

They called for expanding air strikes as well as "for the United States to provide arms, ammunition, and equipment to Kurdish forces, Sunni tribesmen, and others" fighting against the IS.

Robert P. George, a prominent Catholic and Republican at Princeton University, organized the petition. Signatories include Cornel West, professor of philosophy and Christian practice at Union Theological Seminary in New York City; Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; and Susannah Heschel, professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. —David Gibson, Religion News Service, added sources

## Who are the Kurds?

IN THE continuing conflict in Iraq, Kurds are frequently mentioned alongside Iraq's Sunni and Shi'a Muslim populations as one of the key groups involved in power struggles for which sharp religious divides have played a major part. But while the Kurds are a crucial part of Iraq's political makeup, they are an ethnic group, not a distinct religious sect within Islam.

Kurds are more appropriately compared to Arabs, the largest ethnic group in Iraq, or other regional ethnic groups such as Assyrians or Turkmen.

Much has been reported about the desire of many Kurds for greater autonomy or even independence from Baghdad. However, when it comes to religion, Kurds share a good deal in common with the Arab majority, especially Sunni Muslims.

Overall, Arabs represent 78 percent of Iraq's population, while Kurds are 16 percent and other, smaller ethnic groups constitute the remainder, according to a 2011 Pew Research survey. In terms of religious sect, Iraqi Arabs are somewhat split: the survey found that most said they were Shi'a Muslims (62 percent), but about three in ten identified themselves as Sunnis (30 percent) and 6 percent said they were "just Muslim."

Nearly all Iraqi Kurds consider themselves Sunni Muslims. In the survey, 98 percent of Kurds in Iraq identified themselves as Sunnis and only 2 percent identified as Shi'a. (A small minority of Iraqi Kurds, including Yazidis, are not Muslims.) But being a Kurd does not necessarily mean alignment with a particular religious sect. In neighboring Iran, according to the data, Kurds were split about evenly between Sunni and Shi'a.

Although recent conflicts in the region may have resulted in population shifts, the survey found that overall, Shi'a Arabs made up about half of Iraq's population (49 percent), Sunni



**FIGHTING ISIS:** A Kurdish Peshmerga near the Syrian border, recently returned from fighting ISIS in Tal Afar.

Arabs comprised about a quarter (24 percent), and Sunni Kurds were a somewhat smaller share (15 percent). Other Muslims account for about 8 percent of Iraq's population. Five percent of its population does not identify as Muslim.

These three major religious and ethnic groupings in Iraq—Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Sunni Kurds—share certain core religious beliefs. For example, each group professes near universal belief in God (Allah) and the Prophet Muhammad, and more than nine in ten say that they fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. Though there are some important distinctions in belief and practice between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, the religious differences between Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds are comparatively small. For example, Shi'a Arabs are united in their belief that visiting the shrines of Muslim saints is acceptable (98 percent). Fewer Sunni Arabs (71 percent) and Sunni Kurds (59 percent) support this practice. —Besheer Mohamed [originally published by the Pew Research Center]

## Women take the reins at three tall-steeple mainline churches

In quick succession, three women have been chosen to lead historic tall-steeple churches in major cities.

In May, Shannon Johnson Kershner became the first woman solo senior pastor at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church. In June, Amy Butler was elected senior pastor of New York City's Riverside Church. And in July, Ginger Gaines-Cirelli began leading Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.

"For women to speak in those pulpits and speak boldly as public voices in these very public buildings is very powerful," said Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, who recently hosted a dinner party to welcome Butler to town.

Many denominations have for decades included women in their clergy ranks. The rise of these three women has been faster than many of their counterparts. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research reports that women clergy are much more likely to serve in smaller congregations.

Diana Butler Bass, a scholar and author of *Christianity After Religion*, hailed the arrival of these women—all in their forties and leading large, urban, neo-Gothic churches—but also wondered if they reflect the "General Motors phenomenon."

"Are women coming into leadership only as the institutions are collapsing?"



**IN NEW YORK:** Amy Butler greets congregants at Riverside Church in Manhattan during her candidacy weekend.



**IN WASHINGTON, D.C.: Ginger Gaines-Cirelli leads worship at Foundry United Methodist Church.**

Bass asked. "Now that they're in crisis, it's almost like the men are moving out and, 'Oh well, we'll just leave it to the women.' Then if the church doesn't succeed, it's the woman's fault. It's kind of a double-edged sword."

Gaines-Cirelli, 44, doesn't view it that way.

"There are challenges, and I think that we face them," she said. "The fact that women are being counted among those who are capable of facing those challenges at the highest level is a very positive sign."

Cynthia Woolever, a sociologist of religion who edits the *Parish Paper*, a newsletter for regional offices of mainline denominations, noted that the movement of women to these significant sanctuaries is occurring in mainline Protestantism, where about 20 percent of congregations are led by clergywomen.

"If you look at conservative Protestant churches, you find very few; in the Catholic church, zero," Woolever said. "It's wonderful that women are being given those kinds of opportunities to serve in those very large churches, but it's a very small slice of the pie."

All three of the senior pastors have had to jump gender-specific hurdles.

In June, Butler wrote on social media about how a funeral director didn't believe she was a minister. She also once

had to get an emergency room security guard to log on to her former church's website to show him her photo there so she could pay a late-night visit to a sick congregant.

"Look, I know you're his girlfriend," the guard told her before she convinced him otherwise.

Kershner said that early in her ministry, when she was a hospital chaplain, she often was rebuffed because she was not a "real minister."

In every place she's served as the first woman pastor, Gaines-Cirelli has heard a variation on this theme: "I was so worried that we were getting a woman, but I think you're going to be just fine."

Comparable pay has been yet another hurdle. But both Butler and Len Leach, chair of Riverside's church council, said the pastor's base salary of \$250,000 is equivalent to that received by her predecessor, Brad Braxton.

"It is a big job, and for me it's a big, wonderful opportunity and a big risk, and so I think the Riverside Church has really stepped out here to set a great example for the rest of Christendom," said Butler, a native Hawaiian who will lead a majority black congregation.

Butler described her total package, including benefits, as "fair." Leach said Butler decided to give \$35,000 annually

to the interdenominational church's general fund and an additional \$26,000 as a scholarship to pay the annual tuition of a student at the church's day school.

Kershner and Gaines-Cirelli also said they are paid fairly.

All three women are not only leading congregations but staffs that include other female clergy. Riverside's staff has four other women clergy, Fourth Presbyterian Church has three female associate pastors, and Foundry has one female associate pastor as well as a woman executive pastor.

"The truth is that for years, it was all men; in some places it still is, and nobody bats an eye," Gaines-Cirelli said. "So the fact that we are live-streaming to the world this other vision is kind of powerful."

Leo Lawless, a Foundry member, agreed.

"It's about time, isn't it?" he said, noting that a recent worship service featured Gaines-Cirelli and two other women clergy, and two female acolytes as well as a laywoman who read the scriptures.

The three senior clergymen all say they look forward to the day when they're viewed simply as their congregation's pastor, rather than its woman pastor.

Kershner said, "My hope is that little boys and little girls see me and the other clergy and think if that's something that they say and others think God's calling them to do, then they can do it."

—Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service



COURTESY OF FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**IN CHICAGO: Shannon Johnson Kershner leads children in a song at Fourth Presbyterian Church.**

## Rare Mormon documents go on display for first time

For the first time ever, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has assembled some of its most treasured historical documents into a single exhibit and is inviting the public to view them.

In early September, 26 books, manuscripts, and other papers that date from before the faith's founding in 1830 will be on display at the LDS Church History Library in downtown Salt Lake City. The exhibit is slated to last for at least five years.

Taken together, the documents are worth several million dollars, so church officials waited to showcase them until their safety could be secured, said Steven E. Snow, LDS church historian and recorder.

"This exhibit is not intended to silence critics" of Mormon history, Snow said. "But members will find it faith promoting."

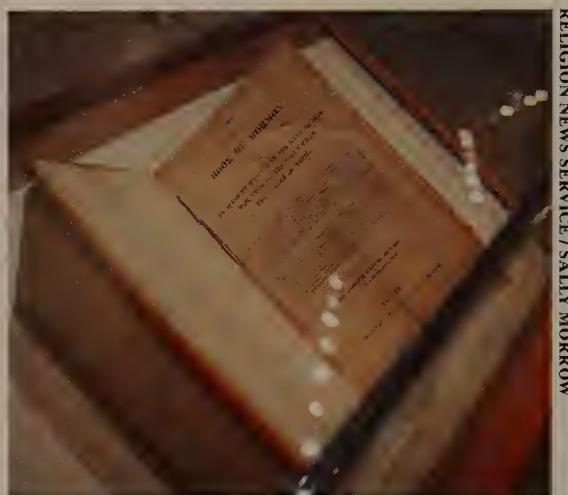
It comes at a time when LDS officials have worked for more transparency about their faith's past, making more documents available online, publishing scholarly essays about controversial episodes, and opening archives to outside researchers.

A page from the original Book of Mormon—which Latter-day Saints believe founder Joseph Smith translated from an ancient record—is “the single most valuable manuscript because of its importance to the church,” said Richard E. Turley, assistant church historian and recorder.

It is written with “one endless flow,” as Smith dictated it to scribes, Turley said, without breaks for paragraphs or, as in the modern version, verses.

Compare that with Smith’s earliest personal journal entry November 27, 1832, which is another item in the collection. Smith wrote a sentence, scratched it out, started again, and concluded the entry by jotting down “praying to God for help,” Turley said.

Smith’s dictation of the Book of Mormon manuscript in a single draft, which he completed in 60 to 90 days, “was nothing short of marvelous,” Turley



RELGION NEWS SERVICE / SALLY MORROW

**RARE BOOKS:** *The first edition of the Book of Mormon, printed in 1830, here on display at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' Independence Visitors' Center in Missouri, is part of a collection now exhibited in Utah.*

said. “To Latter-day Saints . . . it means the first manuscript, the Book of Mormon, is something created by the gift and power of God.”

Other items in the exhibit include:

- A Book of Commandments, an early collection of Smith’s revelations. Only 29 copies exist.
- A handwritten letter dictated by Smith to church members from Missouri’s Liberty Jail, where he and others were imprisoned. Portions of the letter became part of the Mormon canon’s Doctrine and Covenants.
- Minutes of LDS organizations launched by Mormon women—the Young Ladies’ Retrenchment Association (forerunner of today’s Young Women organization for girls ages 12 to 17) and the Primary (for children under 12).

Seeing these minutes “should give modern Mormon women an understanding of their history and the autonomy of women at the time,” said Jenny Reeder, women’s history specialist for the LDS Church History Department.

—Peggy Fletcher Stack, *Salt Lake Tribune*

## Methodists in the UK are dwindling quickly

AS THE Methodist Church in Britain loses members, one religious affairs commentator described it as “like an iceberg that’s just crumbling into the sea.”

The comments of Linda Woodhead, a sociologist of religion at Lancaster University, follow the publication of a report titled “Statistics for Mission” by the Methodist Church, which shows a dramatic collapse of membership to about 200,000 in the U.K. in the last decade.

“It’s totally dying out,” she said. “On current trends, [the Methodists] will disappear, very soon.”

Moira Sleight, editor and publisher of the *Methodist Recorder*, said, “During the past ten years membership of the Methodist Church has fallen by a third, with attendance falling by a similar proportion.”

Methodist churches sprang up in Britain during the aftermath of the French Revolution and the start of the Industrial Revolution—days when the working classes were poorly paid and revolution was in the air.

The brothers Charles and John Wesley were ordained Anglicans who defied the Church of England’s establishment by holding open-air meetings and writing more than 6,000 hymns urging industrial and agricultural laborers to turn their backs on alcohol and gambling.

In America, Methodists were popular because they helped fill a spiritual vacuum created by Anglicans who deserted their flocks at the time of the American Revolution.

Methodists around the world number 70 to 80 million people. The United Methodist Church in the United States has 8 million members. There are approximately 5 million members in Africa, Asia, and different parts of Europe.

In the *Times*, Richard Vautrey, former vice president of the Methodist Church, said Methodists must not despair.

“Let’s not dwell on our pain,” he said, “but instead celebrate each God-given day we have left.” —Trevor Grundy, Religion News Service

# People



GERMAN FEDERAL ARCHIVES (CREATIVE COMMONS)

■ German theologian **Wolfhart Pannenberg** died September 5 at his home near Munich at the age of 85. He was professor at the University of Munich from 1968 until his retirement in 1993, and he held visiting professorships in the 1960s at the University of Chicago, Harvard, and the Claremont School of Theology.

Pannenberg was widely hailed as a giant on the theological scene. "He had the most encyclopedic mind I have ever encountered," wrote Philip Clayton, a professor at Claremont, and his theology was "unrivaled in its comprehensiveness, depth, and rigor."

He studied with Karl Barth but quickly moved in his own direction. While he appreciated Barth's emphasis on God's sovereignty and on the decisiveness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, Pannenberg was troubled by what he saw as the intellectual dualism in Barth's work.

In a 1981 essay for the CHRISTIAN CENTURY series How My Mind Has Changed, Pannenberg wrote: "It seemed to me that the truly sovereign God could not be regarded as absent or superfluous in ordinary human experience and philosophical reflection, but that every single reality should prove incomprehensible (at least in its depth) without recourse to God, if he actually was the Creator of the world. . . . I felt that my philosophy and theology should not be permitted to separate, but that within their unity it should be possible to affirm the awe-inspiring otherness of God even more uncompromisingly than Barth had done."

Pannenberg viewed theology as a public and scientific venture that drew on the disciplines of philosophy, history, and natural science to explore and discern the truth of Christian revelation. According to the late Stanley Grenz, an American expositor of Pannenberg, he fought a life-

long battle against what he saw as subjectivism in theology. "Dogmatic statements are hypotheses to be tested for coherence with other knowledge," Grenz said in explaining his mentor's work.

Pannenberg's books include *Jesus: God and Man* (1968), *Theology and the Kingdom of God* (1969), *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (1976), and the three-volume *Systematic Theology* (1988–1994).

Clayton, writing on a Patheos blog, said that for all Pannenberg's wrestling with philosophy and science, he was in the end a man of faith. "He believed that the richness and immensity of God call for the most profound study and reflection that our minds are capable of, that theology should meet and exceed the highest standards that philosophers set for themselves, and that we never need to compromise as we wrestle to understand as much of the divine nature as we can grasp through every source available to us."

■ The work of **Roman Vishniac**, who created a visual record of European Jewish life before the Holocaust, is now open to the world, online.

"His photographs of prewar Jewish life became the iconic face of a world that was destroyed," said Judith Cohen, director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's photographic reference collection.

A partnership between the museum and New York's International Center of Photography, which owns Vishniac's negatives and photographs, launched a new website, vishniac.icp.org.

The archive's more than 9,000 photographs include portraits of the general culture—nuns, window washers, a dog that doesn't want to be walked—in addition to shtetl rabbis, Jewish farmers, and Hebrew school students, many of which also appear in Vishniac's 1983 book *A Vanished World*. The ICP gave the responsibility for digitizing Vishniac's negatives—most of which had never been published or printed—to Ardon Bar-Hama, who had digitized the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The ICP and the museum hope the

online archive will increase the likelihood that viewers might identify people they know in Vishniac photographs—many of them murdered by the Nazis—and share their stories. Several years ago, for example, a woman walked up to a photograph of a farmer's smiling, deeply lined face at an exhibition at the Holocaust museum and saw Chaim Simcha Mechlowitz, her grandfather, who had died in Auschwitz.

Vishniac, who died in 1990, fled in his native Russia in 1920, arrived in Berlin, and began snapping pictures. In 1935 the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a relief group, asked him to take photographs to help raise money for Jews in Eastern Europe. In 1939 the relief agency sent Vishniac to document Nazism in Western Europe. So as not to raise suspicion, Cohen said, the photographer would sometimes pose his young daughter in front of Nazi propaganda so it would look as if he was taking a picture of her, as opposed to examples of Nazi depravity. Vishniac immigrated to the United States in 1940.—Religion News Service

ANDREW A. SKOLNICK



■ **Geoffrey A. Black**, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ, has announced that he will retire halfway through his four-year term, at the conclusion of the 30th General Synod in June 2015. "Over the years that I have served, the United Church of Christ has experienced significant changes in its national setting," Black wrote to colleagues.

"It has been a challenge and a privilege to lead and guide through this time of transition. However, I believe that we will soon arrive at a juncture where the transition in governance, ministry alignment, and missional direction will be complete." Black was reelected by the UCC general synod to a second term in June 2013. He was called to the leadership of the church in 2009. After spending nearly 15 years as a pastor in New York, Black was the conference minister for the New York Conference of the UCC and served in the UCC's Office for Church Life and Leadership.—UCC news



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

# LIVING BY The Word

Sunday, October 5

*Isaiah 5:1–7; Matthew 21:33–46*

**ECONOMISTS WARN US** with increasing urgency about the sharply widening income gaps that mark the American economy, about the disappearance of the middle class and the end of the social contract. The usual effects of income inequality are in evidence: stock market growth without similar gains in jobs or job security, financial speculation and bubbles, growing political corruption. Such things typically lead to class alienation, to wagons circling around ideological and religious legitimations, and eventually to violence.

These are the ways of human empires, whether ancient or modern. But how do you help people see what is happening around them and to them—to connect the dots, nurture hope, and encourage alternative practices? Narratives that help people see their world more clearly are crucial tools in shaping anti-imperial vision and resilience.

Jesus' parable of the so-called wicked tenant farmers is a textbook illustration—a parody, even—of the economic and political dynamics of empire. But the parable has usually been interpreted as a religious allegory culminating in God's judgment on Israel for killing God's son and the subsequent replacement of Israel by more suitable tenants, that is, the (gentile) church. We should be wary of the self-serving and anti-Semitic aspects of this Christian interpretation. Allegorical readings tend to obscure, if not supplant, the dynamics of the story itself.

Like Mark, Matthew begins this parable with a scenario that recalls the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah 5. In Isaiah the primary issue is that the vineyard, a stock symbol for Israel itself, produces thorns (an outpouring of bloodshed from exploitation) instead of grapes (justice and right social relationships). All of the beloved's efforts to situate, prepare, and secure the vineyard come to naught, which leads the beloved to remove the vineyard's protections and allow it to be trampled, wasted, and abandoned. The whole vineyard (Israel) suffers destruction for its failure to produce fruit.

In Matthew and Mark's parables, the problem is not that the vineyard fails to produce fruit, but that its produce is withheld from the legal owner. We tend to blame the tenant farmers wholly for the crisis the parable describes. But in Jesus' day there was widespread dispossession of smallholders from their family lands. So perhaps the tenants' behavior reflects their conviction that their best hope is to repossess the land by whatever means they can. At a minimum, the tenants' actions seem to represent an act of desperation, a reflection of their vulnerability in a subsistence economy.

Jesus uses the parable not only to describe violent economic realities and the politics of retribution but also to invite the leaders of Israel into issuing their own judgment. The judgment they pronounce makes clear how they align themselves with the characters in the story. The chief priests and elders were themselves the wealthy landowners in first-century Judah, the beneficiaries of imperial economics and politics who used their power in the temple system to deprive subsistence farmers of their land. So they identify with the landowner, not the tenants. In Matthew's version, Jesus asks them what they would do if they found themselves in the circumstances the parable describes, and they answer without hesitation: "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

The parable is thus not just a lens on the economic realities of the day but also a mirror for the chief priests. Jesus' citation of Psalm 118 in reply suggests a reversal of expectations: the rejected stone becomes the cornerstone. By the end of the story it is clear to the Judean elites that Jesus means for them to identify not with the landowner but with the desperate, usurping, and violent tenants who keep the produce for themselves. He accepts the sentence they would hand down to their tenant farmers as the judgment they will now themselves receive.

When the parable is read as an allegory of God's judgment against Israel, an implicit assumption is made that God would think and act like the Jewish elites. This interpretation presumes that, in the end, God is more like the Jewish elites than like the agent of healing, redemption, and mercy that Jesus has been describing during his ministry. Are the Jewish elites right about who God is?

It's more consistent with Matthew's larger frame to conclude instead that by declaring what they would do, the Jewish elites pronounce their own judgment, one that is congruent not only with their own practices but with their perception of who God is. This does not mean, however, that their self-understanding defines who God is or circumscribes God's capacity to act in forgiveness or mercy toward others.

Jesus uses the parable to entrap the Jewish leaders into pronouncing their own judgment, and it has entrapped subsequent generations of interpreters as well. Modern Western readers have a strong tendency to identify the male authority figure in parables with God, even in stories where that figure behaves like a wealthy elite or a despot. In doing so, we usually affirm an understanding of God as an authoritarian judge. And perhaps, then, that is how God will act toward us.

But maybe Matthew uses this parable to invite us to ask ourselves who God is: the God of the Jewish leaders in the story, or the God of Jesus Christ?

# Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, October 12  
*Isaiah 25:1-9; Exodus 32:1-14*

J. LOUIS MARTYN describes Galatians as a sermon that addresses two questions: What time is it, and whose world is it? In fact, most if not all of the Bible can be fruitfully read through these two questions—which, given the growing array of tempests, idols, obsessions, and distractions that cloud our vision and dull our ears, are as pressing now as ever. These questions also provide a framework for this week's readings.

The story of the golden calf is a parody of Israelite idolatry. When the Israelites grow weary of waiting while God speaks to Moses, they demand that Aaron “make gods for us, who shall go before us.” Before the calf is cast, the people name Moses as “the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt,” but as soon as the calf is finished, they announce, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” Both statements deny the reality affirmed at the beginning of the Decalogue: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod. 20:2).

The golden calf symbolizes not only the breaking of the first two commandments but also the people’s short memories and wobbly convictions. Perhaps Aaron, who apparently holds a cynical view of the people (32:22), fashions the calf as a parody of the people’s absurd insecurity. But for the narrator of Exodus, this story is a parody of the resemblance between the Israelites and the people of Egypt, from which they came, and of Canaan, to which they are heading. At last the Israelites have a god like the peoples around them, albeit pint-sized!

Those who render God in images and trust these for deliverance have succumbed freely to darkness. Because the people do not understand what time it really is, or whose world it is, what should be a time of liberation from bondage and of realization of God’s promise becomes instead a time of wandering and futility.

The Isaiah passage looks at the world at the very moment of God’s long-planned deliverance of the poor and needy—not only the people of Israel!—from the ruthless alien empires that have held them captive. This is a time of refuge, shelter, and shade in circumstances where these seem impossible dreams.

While Isaiah does not mention resurrection, the poem focuses on the time when God destroys the shroud of death that covers all people and nations, when God wipes away the tears and disgrace of all those who have waited for this day. Here past, present, and future blur together in a transcendent yet deeply immanent doxological vision. This vision captures the world and the time in

which God’s people live most faithfully, the transformative edge of history, the moment when God’s rule is fulfilled and the powers of this world cast down. If Exodus 32 describes a time of idolatrous blindness and futility, Isaiah 25 shows us the moment of hope in which God’s people are called to live—at all times.

The rough transitions and extreme images of Matthew’s parable of a king with an unruly guest list have made it a prime target for allegorical readings: the king represents God, the son (who does not figure directly in this story) is Jesus, the first round of invitees represent Israel, the second round of invitees is the church, and so forth. We should always be wary of interpretations of parables that work to our advantage, as does this traditional allegorization, rather than make us struggle and question our place.

The extreme images of this parable are also characteristic qualities of parody and caricature. Stripped of its allegorical accretions, this story, from beginning to end, is a political cartoon aimed first at the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem (this is the third parable in a series that constitutes Jesus’ response to their challenge in Matthew 21:23) and second at the community of disciples, who, like the people of Israel in the wilderness, are always at risk of exchanging the true reality of God’s rule for the better-known gods of this world. Here it is Israel’s leaders who choose to dwell in a time of imperial darkness and thereby risk taking the people with them.

This parable exposes for critical scrutiny the systems of honor and patronage in which the Jewish leaders participate—

## Be wary of interpretations of parables that work to our advantage.

to their own advantage, but the disadvantage of the people—and especially the violence that lies just beneath their façades of decency. Like most parables, this story is meant to raise questions: To whom do you owe allegiance? What is required to honor the one to whom you owe allegiance? How then should you respond to the call of that one upon your life? What if you accept the call but in practice deny what it represents?

Each of these questions points us back to those foundational questions for apocalyptic people: What time is it? Whose world is it?

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*The author is Stan Saunders, who is associate professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. He is author of Preaching the Gospel of Matthew (Westminster John Knox) and is working on a book on the story of creation in the New Testament.*

# State of the colony

**TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO**, Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon sparked a lively debate about church, ministry, and Christian identity with their book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. The book called on Christians to think of themselves as “aliens” in American culture who were part of the countercultural ethos of the church and shaped by the biblical witness rather than by liberal, capitalist, or democratic assumptions.

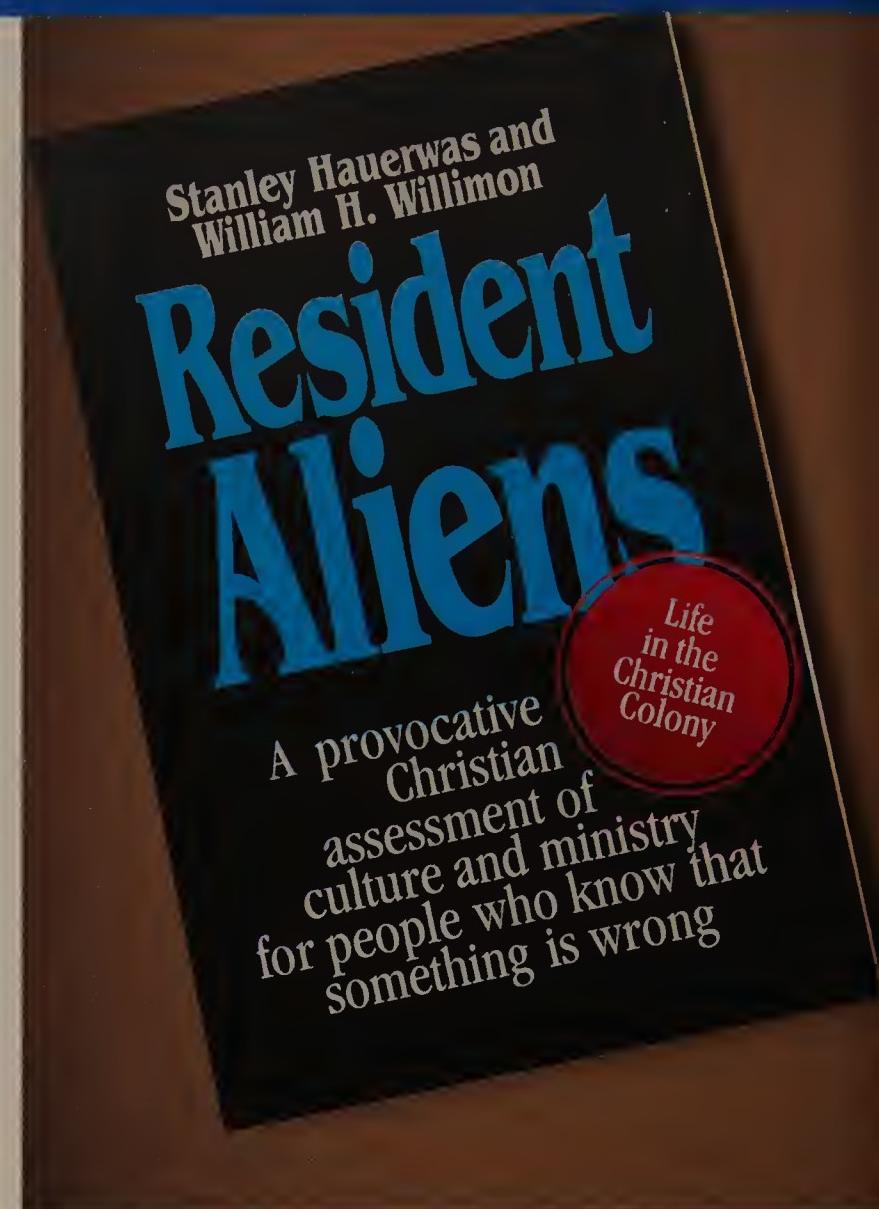
Several major themes in *Resident Aliens*—the importance of Christian formation in the church, the church as a community set apart from the wider culture, and the end of the Constantinian alliance between church on the one hand and state and culture on the other—have since become part of the mainstream theological conversation.

Have these themes and arguments been helpful to theologians, pastors, and Christian communities? After 25 years of experience and argument, has the church learned anything about what being a “colony of resident aliens” could mean or should mean? Are there important ways of being countercultural that the church has overlooked? Has the focus on creating vibrant, ecclesial communities had a favorable impact on the witness of the church or the opposite? What are the challenges to realizing this vision? We asked some pastors and theologians to offer their perspective.

Several years ago, when the Baptists of North Carolina decided to take a stand against homosexuality, the new preacher at a church in my hometown excommunicated Gene. The pastor’s case was simple: Gene was, as everyone knew, gay. North Carolina Baptists had just made it clear that being gay was a sin. Therefore the church had to distance itself from Gene.

I wasn’t there to witness the proceedings, but the result was swift: Gene was no longer welcome in the church that had raised him.

Counties don’t get any redder than that little corner of North Carolina where Gene and I grew up. I can’t imagine that Gene ever felt affirmed as a homosexual in school, on the Little League field, or at church. But in that little congregation where his daddy played the organ and his uncle chaired the board of deacons, Gene had always had a home. People who read their Bibles and loved Jesus also loved him. Maybe this



love for their native son was radical, but they never stopped to think about it until a preacher whose religion made him morally worse came along.

I understand Hauerwas and Willimon’s *Resident Aliens* as a response to the sort of civil religion that makes people morally worse than they would be otherwise. Hauerwas and Willimon both grew up during the civil rights movement, when people like Clarence Jordan were being excommunicated for

## The gospel’s power depends on Christians remaining resident.

fellowshiping with black people. In such a context, the words of the prophets ring true. We cannot live at ease in Zion. We must acknowledge that God’s people are aliens and strangers in a strange land.

*Resident Aliens* tried to show that this problem at the heart of southern religion is endemic to American Christianity. Two southerners held a mirror up to the church and said, “Y’all have a look. To everyone else in the world, you don’t come off much better than a Mississippi Klansman.”

Or rather, that’s what they might have said. Instead, they took on the ideologies they saw propping up American civil religion—liberalism, democracy, and Christendom. *Resident*

*Aliens* made space for a conversation about how being a good Christian might be different from being a good American.

But I wonder if the attempt to make us less American has made it more difficult for some of us to see that the problem at the heart of southern religion belongs to all of us. Yes, we need communities of character to form people in the virtues. But we can't simply opt out of our inherited contradictions. However alien the gospel may make us, its power in the world depends on us remaining *resident*—awkwardly present in compromised churches like Gene's, where corrupted religion threatens to make us worse.

My guess is that two or three would have been enough to turn the tide against that new preacher. If *Resident Aliens* is right, then the future of American Christianity may depend on such as these.

—Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove  
*Rutba House, Durham, North Carolina*

**W**hen I read *Resident Aliens* I thought about blood pressure. Not because the book raised mine, but because an analogy to blood pressure medicine describes my reaction to the book. The medicine that saves patients with high blood pressure will harm those with low blood pressure, and vice versa.

I think the primary patients of *Resident Aliens* were traditional mainline Protestants—epitomized by Methodists, who largely understood themselves to represent America's religion. Jesus had value for the afterlife, to be sure, but he also had

## “Alien colony” is not the only image the church needs.

value in strengthening the American people for their role as global leaders in this “Christian century.”

The authors' bold counterclaim was that Jesus did not come to be the mascot, watchdog, or spiritual cheerleader for the American project of pursuing happiness. The church was more than “yet another ‘helping institution’ to gratify their individual desires.”

With this, of course, I agreed and still agree. But around 1990 I became concerned because I saw the religious right gaining steam and its members didn't read Hauerwas or Willimon. I worried that if moderate and progressive Christians retreated into their churches as resident aliens, focusing on “being the church” rather than “transforming the world,” the religious right would be the only Christian voice in the public square. That would be bad, I felt, for Christian faith and for the public square.

That is largely what has happened over the last 25 years. Now, perhaps ironically, the religious right has so deeply fused its agenda with that of American nationalism (also known as “exceptionalism”) that it is in a situation very similar to that of the mainline Protestants for whom *Resident Aliens* was origi-

nally prescribed. Its members feel that America is rightfully theirs, a possession to “take back” or defend or transform. They elect politicians, set (or obstruct) policy, and define *Christian* for more and more people.

Hauerwas and Willimon saw this coming. The fundamental issue, they said, was “not whether we shall be conservative or liberal, left or right, but whether we shall be faithful to the church's peculiar vision of what it means to love and act as disciples.” Of course, describing that “peculiar vision” is not as easy as it sounds.

The Bible contains many images that convey a wide range of possible relationships between “church/people of God” and “society/world.” *Resident alien* is one of them, and it is an important corrective medicine to *chaplaincy to empire, helping institution, or conquering army*.

But medicines are only of value in relation to the disease of the patient, and *alien colony* (a problematic image in itself) isn't the only image we need. *Yeast, salt, doctor, and light*, for example, are alternative images that suggest a concern for “transforming the world”—while also requiring a unique, countercultural identity. Perhaps the book that needs to be written now might be *Resident Salt, Light, and Yeast* . . . or perhaps *Doctor in Residence*?

—Brian D. McLaren  
*author of A New Kind of Christianity*

**I** always appreciated the effect that *Resident Aliens* had on students. It gave them confidence to take the church seriously as the place in which and from which to imagine their lives and work in the world. This theological manifesto captured so much of the gestalt of Hauerwas and Willimon—their lightning quick wit, their relentless slashing of liberal Protestant sensibilities, their trenchant diagnosis of the identity crisis of mainline Christianity, and their inspired vision of the politics of God made manifest in the body of Jesus.

The book also captured the feel of the times at the tail end of the Reagan revolution, along with the retreat of progressive coalitions and politics and the rise of a new class of intellectuals who would come to be called neoconservatives. In fact, the book had the feel of the neocon texts that were emerging at that time. It paralleled their critique of liberalism, their diagnosis of a fading moralistic American identity, and their demand for a disciplined role for government.

*Resident Aliens* was not a neoconservative text, although some read it that way. It was, however, quintessentially an American text. The book affirmed the strange way we Americans deal with our racial history and its current realities by indirection, innuendo, and avoidance. Black people remained a subtext, an unspoken backdrop for narrating the Constantinian problem. Even in his preface to the 25th anniversary edition, Willimon, without ever reflecting on the racial complexities of Obama's presidency or of his faith, chides United Methodist bishops for their deferential focus on the president. Avoidance continued. *Resident Aliens* told

a generation that they could make church-state issues intelligible in American without seeing how race is tightly woven through that relation.

The book also presented a romantic notion of church practices inside a detached vision of formation. The book told students that church practices are identity forming, which for some was news but for many simply affirmed their precritical

Christian identity as a wall with a door and not a door in a wall. This is no minor difference, because it pivots on the barrier-breaking body of Jesus, who brings together those who would prefer to stay separated and places confidence in us to do the same.

—Willie James Jennings,  
Duke Divinity School

## The book has a detached vision of Christian formation.

piety and exaggerated their focus on the sacraments. The idea of formation in *Resident Aliens* ignored decisive racial, class, and gender formations and gave little help in seeing their interplay. Its vision of practice was impotent in helping grasp the social conditions within which practices are always embedded.

To its credit, the book gave us a more finely grained view of the church-world distinction. Yet here it was haunted by a narrative of social decline fueled by white anxiety. The charge of sectarianism never stuck, but the charge that its version of Christian identity was protectively closed and fed into America's segregated sabbaths did. It gave us an idea of

By directing our attention to questions about the church's identity and mission, Hauerwas and Willimon have done us a great service. To assess how helpful their specific claims are for this project, however, we must be clear about their imagined audience. The audience Hauerwas and Willimon implicitly have in mind is mostly, if not exclusively, white, as evidenced in the opening pages of *Resident Aliens*, which describe a scene in

## Privilege is not shed simply by “being church.”

1963: “By overlooking much that was wrong in the world—it was a racially segregated world, remember—*people* [emphasis mine] saw a world that looked good and right.”

The authors' imagined audience makes the language of “resident aliens” inappropriate and disingenuous. Although attuned to the need for a Christian witness against racism—multiple anecdotes in the book center on race—their framework lacks an analysis of white privilege that is necessary for faithful living in the U.S. context. It is disingenuous for white Protestants to deem ourselves alien to a culture and society we benefit from and have created. Certainly, the call to think of ourselves as resident aliens is normative: we *should* be resident aliens in that we *should not* participate in the destructive forces of American society even if, at present, we foster and maintain them. But their use of the term is also descriptive—as Christians, we *are* resident aliens—and this description is profoundly self-deceptive.

Given the dominance of white Protestantism in our liberal-capitalist-democratic culture and given the privilege that naturally follows, the first step toward a more faithful existence is not to deem ourselves alien to this society but to name our complicity as residents in its sin and repent in concrete ways: by becoming allies in our everyday lives or joining coalitions working to undo racist structures like prisons.

Efforts to mitigate privilege and grow in solidarity with nondominant persons will indeed lead to what Hauerwas and Willimon hope for—Christians becoming more estranged from the American mainstream. But church communities like the Open Door Community in Atlanta that undertake this work know that privilege is not shed simply by “being the church”

### Book of Kells

October 19, 2013: folio 253v-254r

The text of the day is open to Luke, chapter sixteen, verse ten. The initial N, made up of blond men

facing off, grappling and tugging at each other's beards, becomes the first word in the section that warns us

that no servant can serve two masters. Irony intended. Later, in beautiful insular majuscule, the open letters filled

in red and blue, we read *You cannot serve both god and money*. I wish that these words would rise off the page, a swarm of bees,

become honey to spread on our daily bread. When the scribes made an error, in a world before white-out, the correct word

was inserted in a box of red dots. Aren't there words today we'd like to amend like that? In this dimly lit room, circling

glass cases, I return to view the same vellum over again, Twelve hundred years later, clear as the day it was written,

I think of Henri Nouwen: *The word is born in silence, and silence is the deepest response to the word.*

Barbara Crooker

through word and sacrament. At the Open Door, sacraments are the primary resources for Christian social engagement—but only when they intentionally reach beyond church walls. At the Open Door the Eucharist table extends to the fold-up tables in the community's dining room where homeless persons eat, and the Eucharist meal includes vending machine food from the death row visitation room. When the sacraments break through church walls in this way, they lead to the work of which Hauerwas and Willimon are so suspicious, the work of "making society better"—in this case, advocating for affordable housing or working to abolish the death penalty. This is the work of residents in a democratic society and the faithful work of Christians who repent of social sin and love their neighbors.

—Jennifer M. McBride  
*Wartburg College*

To be a resident alien is to live on the border. Borders signify the existential reality faced by those, like myself, who have been resident and illegal aliens. Regardless of where we live, how long we have lived there, or how we or our ancestors came to find ourselves within the United States, we live on the borders. To be a resident alien in the United States is to constantly live on the border between power and disen-

franchisement, between privilege and dispossession, between whiteness and color. In this in-between space of borders, we confront economic exploitation and political marginalization.

As one who once actually was a resident alien, I wonder if Hauerwas and Willimon have any clue as to what it means to occupy that space. They do violence to real resident aliens like

## The authors ignore the real resident aliens.

myself when they appropriate our social location without recognizing how the foreign Constantinian Christian culture from which they feel alienated is specifically constructed to privilege the particularity of their race, class, and gender. They romanticize "not belonging" to a dominant culture that historically and continuously revolves around them. Those in the center who self-identify as aliens of the center are able to confuse an unapologetic conviction of the truth of the Christian narrative with a Eurocentric interpretation of what that truth might be.

While those of us who pursue a liberative Christian approach intently listen to the matrix of marginalized voices who occupy the space of alien in a postmodern world, the authors of *Resident Aliens* wish to return us (despite their protestation) to a sectari-

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an premodern world which protects their place while providing religious justification for ignoring the gospel's plea to engage in social justice with those who are the real resident aliens. The authors advocate for a moral vision that provides a virtuous way of conduct which ignores complicity with the social structures that cause oppression. This complicity is further masked through an ecclesiology that makes a preferential option for the church, rather than for the aliens.

This vision of church fails to deconstruct the power dynamics embedded in the type of church attended by Euro-Americans of relative privilege like the authors, thus providing little if any hope for the salvation of the dispossessed, disinherited, and disenfranchised—the real resident aliens. Not to engage in the praxis of transformation is a choice to reinforce the status quo which benefits the authors.

If, as Hauerwas and Willimon claim, “the political task of Christian is to be the church rather than to transform the world,” then all marginalized groups, not just us resident aliens, need to be very concerned, for this is a church whose actions have historically accommodated and justified every immoral form of human exploitation, from massacres to war, from slavery to colonialism. We are called instead to a praxis that challenges, subverts, or undermines the oppressive structures reinforced by the very same Eurocentric Christian vision the authors want us to adopt.

—Miguel De La Torre  
Iliff School of Theology

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—Demosthenes

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**R**esident Aliens was almost a manifesto and perfectly timed. The context was the recent collapse of the Protestant mainline, and the authors were out to assign blame. A “tired old world” had ended sometime in the 1960s or 1970s, Hauerwas and Willimon said, and the church needed to understand itself as “a colony, an island of one culture in the middle of another.” Theologian John Howard Yoder never dramatized in this fashion, but he provided theological undergirding by stressing that Jesus espoused “a new peoplehood and a new way of living together.” The gospel is about the new aeon of the kingdom, Yoder argued. In the old order, sin and death ruled under the signs of vengeance and the state; in the new aeon, the rule of vengeance and the state were overthrown.

## The authors evade the force of every liberation theology.

Asking how Christians should relate to politics and society, *Resident Aliens* gave Yoder’s answer: the gospel alternative to activist churches, which aim at social reform, and conversion churches, which focus on individual souls, is to form confessional communities of the cross that practice love of enemies, suffering for righteousness, and worshiping Christ in all things.

*Resident Aliens* quotably told church leaders to shed their Christendom consciousness and nostalgia. It knowingly said that seminaries produced young pastors lacking any idea of what their job was—to help congregations be the church. It quoted pastors who felt besieged by a culture that had turned against them. The book provided help by reviving social gospel arguments about the evisceration of kingdom Christianity in Constantinian Christianity—though the authors never put it that way, because denigrating “social activist churches” was central to their agenda. They also provided help by rightly stressing that churches are supposed to be formative communities—never mind that this too was a social gospel theme. *Resident Aliens* won attention by censoring modern churches for being lured into social activism. This critique implicitly skewered the entire tradition of modern Christian social ethics, a critique Hauerwas confirmed in a slew of subsequent books.

But the dichotomy between the faithful church and the pagan everything else, borrowed from Yoder, was not what social ethics needed. It

smacked of religious exclusivity and the conviction that other religions are false or worthless. It undercut Christian struggles for a just order and yielded indiscriminate broadsides against liberalism. It reduced the theology of the kingdom or commonwealth of God to a my-group binary, misrepresenting the gospel-centered faith preached by Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King Jr. Above all, it evaded the critical force of every liberation theology, claiming “nonviolent us” status distinguished from unrighteous others—a unitary claim masking the oppressions identified by liberation theologies.

*Resident Aliens* helped many pastors scale back to something they could preach and manage in a time of cultural fragmentation and upheaval, economic globalization, and looming ecological catastrophe. But Christian social ethics is supposed to propel you into that world, not rationalize your insularity.

—Gary Dorrien

*Union Theological Seminary*

**R**eading *Resident Aliens* is a kind of Rorschach test: the way a mainline Methodist reads it will be different from the way someone like me—an evangelical (of sorts) in the Reformed tradition—does. An heir of Abraham Kuyper encouraged to “transform culture,” I

learned from Hauerwas and Willimon how often, under the banner of cultural transformation, we march ahead into cultural assimilation.

It wasn’t until I read *Resident Aliens* that I realized I lacked a functional ecclesiology. Hauerwas and Willimon woke me up to a sense that the church has its own cultural center of gravity. We didn’t have to figure out how to hook up “Christ” with “culture” because the body of Christ is a culture, and specifically a formative culture.

For those of us breaking out of fundamentalism, the Reformed tradition offered a “common grace” license that

## One can be a resident alien and invested in the state.

enabled us to say yes to culture. But in our new enthusiasm for affirmation, we tended to lose the other side of Kuyper’s approach—an emphasis on antithesis. *Resident Aliens* was apocalyptic for me in the sense of unveiling the deformative power of those other spheres of life we were so eager to affirm and transform.

Many of my generation, I think, received this antithesis as a dichotomy: church *instead* of state. We would devote ourselves to setting up an “alternative polis,” the liberal

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—Benjamin M. Stewart, *Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

democratic state be damned. I don't think this was the authors' intention, but their rhetoric didn't do much to curb that conclusion.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the church-as-polis: rereading Augustine's *City of God*, alongside the work of Oliver O'Donovan and Peter Leithart, I can now imagine being a resident alien *and* invested in the state, in all of its glorious failing. The antithesis is always ad hoc. And the Spirit can bend political orders.

You might say that, ironically, *Resident Aliens* brought me to a new, highly qualified appreciation of Christendom—not in the sense of a diminished civil religion, but in O'Donovan's robust sense of a society that bears the crater marks of the gospel's impact.

Charles Marsh's account of the civil rights movement in *The Beloved Community* was a catalyst in this respect. He described a "resident alien" community that hoped its specifically Christian witness would make a dent in the laws of the land. Marsh's tale also narrates what happened when the civil rights movement lost its ecclesial center of gravity. Faithful witness is a precarious dance.

The citizen of the city of God, Augustine emphasizes, will always find herself thrown into a situation of being a resident alien in some outpost of the earthly city. This demands neither a positive or sanguine stance vis-à-vis the earthly city nor a fundamentally dismissive stance with respect to political socie-

ty. Rather, the first political impetus is one of calculated ambivalence and cultivated aloofness tempered by ad hoc evaluations about selective collaborations for the common good. It's not just a question of whether to be resident aliens, but how.

—James K. A. Smith  
Calvin College

In his preface to the 25th anniversary edition of *Resident Aliens*, William Willimon describes its origin as almost "happenstance." We might say something similar about its reception. Important books get used in unexpected ways, and an important book written for the church quickly escapes its authors' purposes. Hauerwas and Willimon wrote *Resident Aliens* for a culture that had ceased to be Christian,

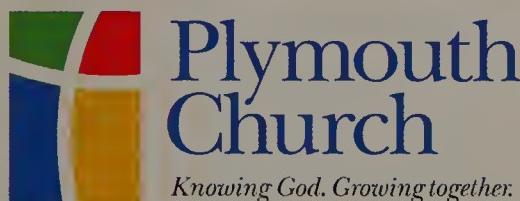
## A work of theology was turned into applied sociology.

in which the church needed a primer on how to live in a world where its message was unwelcome when it was not just incomprehensible.

I've always thought that this was intended as an affirmation of the primacy of theology over sociology. The Word will always be alien. The church will be more or less familiar, though of course to different degrees in different places.

At least one group, however, seized on the book as sociology. In 1989, mainstream Protestant pastors were feeling pretty alien in a culture in which the declining number of people who wanted any religious affiliation mostly wanted something more evangelical, charismatic, or liturgical than their denominations had to offer. They were also feeling alienated from church leaders and seminary professors who weren't giving them much help on the local level where things were coming apart. Hauerwas and Willimon seemed to feel their pain, and their farewell to the big, institutional expressions of American Christendom made the work of parish ministry seem important again.

As a result, what began as a work of theology was put to use as a handbook of applied sociology, joining a whole shelf of works about church growth, media-savvy seeker services, and other prescriptions that coupled easy diagnosis with universal cures. *Resident Aliens*



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was better than that, but important books get read for what people want and need, not for what the authors intended. So the theological description of life in the Christian colony became, paradoxically, a formula for success, and like other formulas for success in the Protestant culture wars, much of its purpose was to point out what other people are doing wrong.

Willimon sees the “happenstance” behind the book’s origin as providential. Might we say something similar about its reception? Twenty-five years on, the pastors, congregations, and denominations to whom *Resident Aliens* was addressed are more distinct from the surrounding culture if only because the culture itself is so sharply polarized that you can’t assimilate to it without becoming schizophrenic. But in our efforts to define ourselves as something apart, the church has come more and more to share the alienation and mistrust that characterize society as a whole.

Perhaps the time has come for resident aliens to focus on the task of being *resident*, to figure out who else now lives in this neighborhood and what we might have in common with them. Providence, as Augustine reminds us, has for the time being placed us here, and if the barbarians are at the gate, this might be a good time to get better acquainted with the neighbors.

—Robin Lovin  
*Center of Theological Inquiry*

**O**f several insights in *Resident Aliens*, I’ll mention two. One is that the focus on the conservative-liberal divide in churches can distract us from perceiving how members of both groups accommodate themselves to dominant values. Both liberal and conservative Christians often buy into the myth of redemptive violence and its justification of militarism. It is good to remember that the path of Christian discipleship often meanders along routes that are not commonly traversed by either liberals or conservatives as defined in the United States.

The second insight is an insistence on the church as an inter-generational community of formation. As the mother of three

## Christians need to talk about rights and the state.

teenagers, I am a witness to how even an imperfect community that tries to be faithful to the way of Jesus can be a powerful force. I would be hard-pressed to raise children in a society traversed by dehumanizing forces such as consumerism and white racism without the support of a village of people engaged in discerning the byways that God’s Spirit seems to be opening up in our time and place.

Nonetheless, the book’s central metaphors of “colony” and “resident aliens” have a number of problematic resonances. To

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speak of a colony is by definition to envision a group of people involved in a colonial endeavor. Given Christianity's complicity with colonialism in much of its history, "life in the Christian colony" is probably not the best way to envision the decolonial way of life that Jesus puts before us.

Furthermore, privileging the expression "resident aliens" may obscure the reality of the millions of those who do not have the benefit of legal residency in this country, though their labor and expertise are of incalculable worth to society. Undocumented migrants experience the incongruences of a legal system shaped by the rights of financial capital to circulate freely rather than by the rights of the earth and its inhabitants of all species to live and thrive. The reality of the undocumented can push us to revisit the language of "rights" and of the "nation-state" (notions disparaged in the book) in ways that do not emerge when we privilege the symbol of resident aliens.

The recent history of many Latin American countries illustrates that a counter-hegemonic sensibility may lead us to defend aspects of the national state (such as public education and hospitals) as a bulwark against the privatization of all things. Likewise, the language of rights has been helpful in Latin America in the struggle to defend nature from depredation (as in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador). I would hesitate to rule out the language of rights or of states as fertile spaces for the Christian imagination; the U.S. civil rights struggle would have been unimaginable without them.

What we require is a spiritual agility that allows us to recognize varied expressions of a counter-hegemonic "citizenship

in heaven" (Phil. 3:20) whenever and however it "becomes flesh."

—Nancy Bedford  
Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary

**R**esident Aliens gave its readers the courage to love the church. Not naively or uncritically—real love is always truthful, after all—but deeply and unapologetically. And it helped convince a generation that there is no Christian identity apart from the church.

Still, the work of Hauerwas and Willimon always seems to elicit the question: Where exactly is this adventuresome church?

A decade after the publication of *Resident Aliens*, two acquaintances of Hauerwas created a Listserv of a dozen or so people who were interested in the question of Christian identity. From this emerged the Ekklesia Project, "a school for subversive friendships," in which Christians across the ecclesial spectrum sought encouragement to live the adventure of the gospel and their love for the church in congregations and parishes.

## The book gave readers the courage to love the church.

Fifteen years later, those associated with the Ekklesia Project take for granted the alien character of discipleship in contemporary culture. They also benefit from (and in some cases have produced) treatments of the relationship between church and world that are more nuanced than what Hauerwas and Willimon were able to offer in their popular treatment of the subject.

The Ekklesia Project is not a church, but it celebrates and supports Christian communities that understand their mission to be that of paying attention to and participating in the work of God in the world: mending, healing, restoring, reconciling. Indeed, Hauerwas and Willimon gave us eyes to see and a vocabulary with which to describe Christian communities who were about this work even before *Resident Aliens* was written—communities like Grace Fellowship and Church of the Sojourners in San Francisco and Church of the Servant King in Oregon.

Indebted to *Resident Aliens*'s insight that the church is the prime locus of Christian identity, the Ekklesia Project launched a Congregational Formation Initiative, rooted in the conviction that theological conversation is not merely a means to an end—let's talk about this or that interesting idea—but is itself a spiritual practice, a holy habit that contributes to the shaping of a people who learn together over time what it means to love, what it means to forgive, what it means in their common life—imperfect as it is—to be a sign of the reign of God.

Like all books written in response to contemporary culture, *Resident Aliens* now seems dated in places. But it helped to ini-

## Common elegance

Kneeling,  
he turned the fish by their tails  
on the iron grate; their skins

sticking and burning.  
The fire died once  
and he bent and blew

on the embers, holding  
his robe at the throat,  
a gesture of such common elegance

the gates flew open.  
A ribbon of dawn  
lay taut and pink on the sea.

When at last he raised his head  
and looked at me, I shivered.  
*Simon, son of John, do you love me?*

Samuel Harrison

tiate a conversation that continues in a new generation about how we negotiate the loves and loyalties that would claim ultimate our allegiance, personally and corporately. In carrying on this conversation, we are invited into the messy, maddening, beautiful adventure that is life in the body of Christ. And we discover—as people in the Ekklesia Project are fond of saying—friends we never knew we had.

—Debra Dean Murphy  
West Virginia Wesleyan College

**R**esident Aliens begins by quoting the well-known Christ hymn in Philippians 2, and it draws on the Philippians 3 notion of our commonwealth being in heaven. The authors develop the idea of the church as made up of resident aliens in this world, because our true home is not in the world. They say this assertion is needed because we now live in a post-Constantinian moment, with the church no longer supported by the official powers of society. At the center of the Christ hymn is a claim about the core of God's work in the life, death, and resurrection of the rabbi of Nazareth: Jesus' self-emptying, or *kenosis*, in and for the sake of the world.

But ironically, the rhetoric and substance of *Resident Aliens* continually turns on an embattled consolidation of identity and action over against the world. For instance, Hauerwas and

Willimon write, "In fact, we are not called to help people. We're called to follow Jesus."

At a time when many formerly established evangelical and liberal Protestant denominations found themselves losing their cultural establishment, the book argued for a new identity for Christians as a distinctive minority, despite Christians remaining the overwhelming majority in the United States. This mode effectively makes a virtue of a necessity—seeming to choose disestablishment when in fact it has come down upon us like a judgment.

## The church's faithfulness lies in giving itself away.

Twenty years before *Resident Aliens*, theologian Donald MacKinnon named disestablishment as judgment in a lecture titled "Kenosis and Establishment." Like Willimon and Hauerwas, MacKinnon begins with Philippians 2, speaking of the "costliness of the incarnate life." But his argument does not underwrite a Christian withdrawal, consolidating identity over against the world, à la *Resident Aliens*. Rather, he argues for accepting dispossession in and for the world. "To live as a Christian in the world today is necessarily to live an exposed life; it is to be stripped of the kind of security that tradition, whether

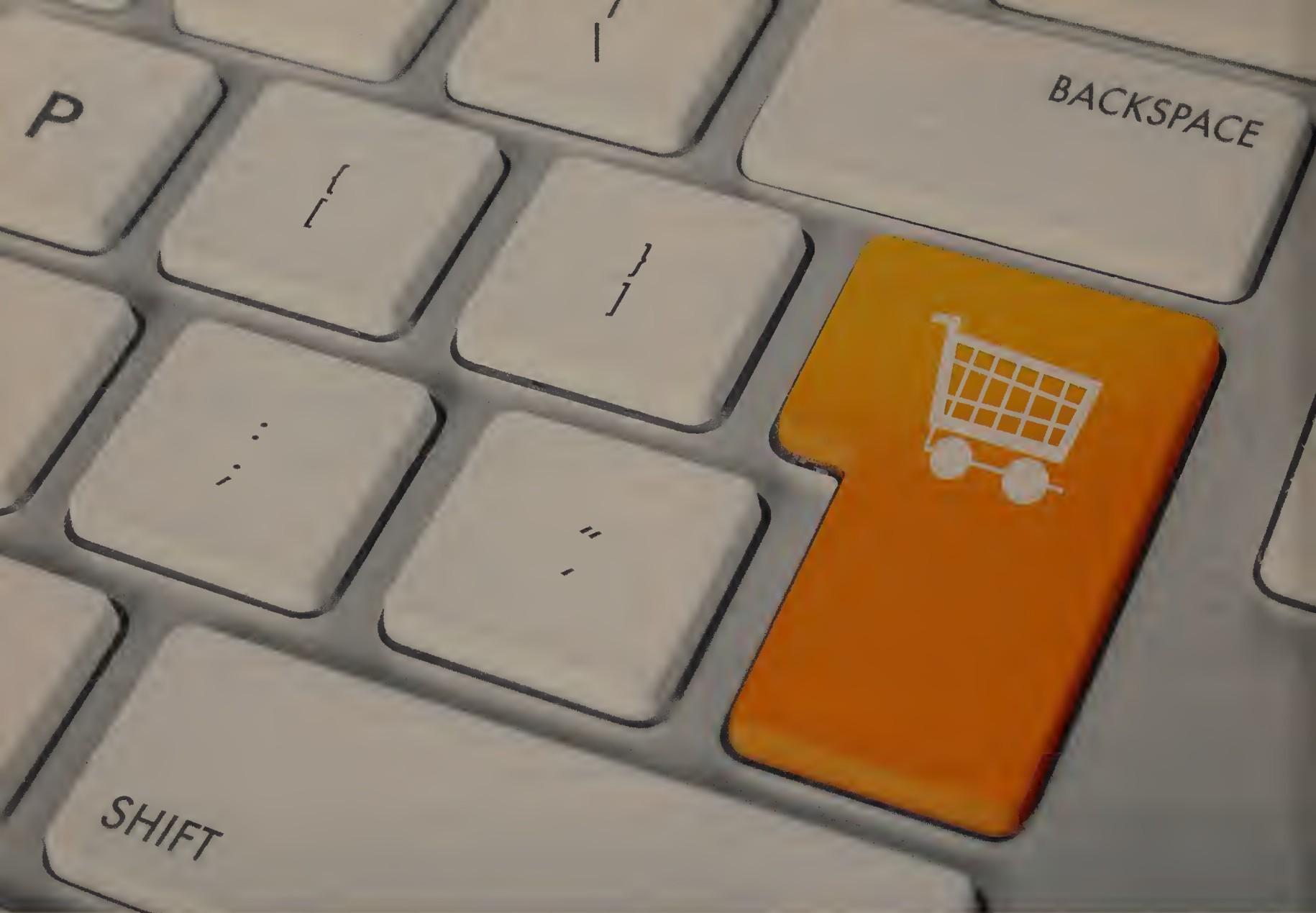


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ecclesiological or institutional, easily bestows." His argument resolutely outlines the losses and difficulties of such a life.

MacKinnon does not predict the form of the church stripped of its former status. Yet he ventures that our frailty will offer a means of presence rather than withdrawal. MacKinnon notes that in welcoming this new frailty we will find that "it is in our weakness that our strength is made perfect."

I offer a contemporary example: Augsburg College, which is located in a downtown Minneapolis neighborhood inhabited by a large population of newly arrived Somali Muslims. Augsburg

has declared that it is a college "called to serve our neighbor." The school's nation-leading program of community service has created neighborhood friendships across faith traditions, and it has encouraged a growing number of Somalis to enroll and consider Augsburg their school too.

The church today is learning that its deepest faithfulness is not in withdrawal from the world but in an anarchic giving itself away in and for the sake of the world.

—Christian Scharen  
Auburn Theological Seminary

## A reply by Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon

Probably it's a good thing that we didn't try to write a book designed to have lasting value. Everyone knows how dull academics can be when we try to qualify every statement, engage all possible objections, and show off our latest reading. (And every preacher knows that the most interesting homiletics is, in one way or another, polemics.)

Still, it would be disingenuous to act as if we were unhappy about the attention given to *Resident Aliens* by an amazing array of churches and Christians. Because of this book we have made new friends in faraway places and discovered the richness and diversity of the church.

Some critics, upon first reading of our book, asked, "Where in the world is the church you want?" Where is the church that lives as if it really is God's unexpected answer to what's wrong with the world? The church that, in the end, wins through suffering witness and love? The church that shares an open table and tries breathlessly to keep up with the movements of the risen Christ? The church that dares to be incomprehensible to the world because it believes Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are true? That church is more ubiquitous than we knew.

We are thankful for the positive and the negative attention to our book because in spite of our modest intentions the book has been used by the Holy Spirit as a catalyst for a discussion that North American Christians badly needed. Above all we are thankful for those pastors who read the book and exclaimed, "I'm not crazy for wanting something more," or even better, "I almost forgot that my little congregation is at the center of a grand adventure over which we have no control."

The 1950s were a triumph of boring white middle-class Christianity. We began the book with that time and place because it's what we know; we were there. Yet as several of the responses indicate, that church which we were trying to encourage to be more faithful was a church deeply implicated, indeed generative of, a host of sin. If that sinfulness was understated in our book, we repent. But then we are white middle-class kind of guys, Methodists who love to get judged, to repent, to be forgiven, converted, and born again. *Resident Aliens* wanted strongly to assert that the 1950s are not coming back. Our time, this time, is a great time to be a disciple of a

Savior like Jesus Christ because he has taken time from us and made time for us.

Although we had many illustrations derived from growing up Christian in a segregated South, we didn't think of the black church as our primary audience; we assumed that the black church didn't need us to tell it how to be resident aliens. Indeed, the black church of the 1960s was instrumental in demonstrating to each of us that the church could be a place of critical theological analysis of the principalities and powers, of courageous, everyday resistance to the wiles of Satan, and a place where ordinary Christians received the resources to fight the powers. We may have failed to make that clear partly because we thought it presumptuous for white guys to pretend we knew what it meant to be black. We assumed that the mainline, liberal, (still) predominantly Caucasian church badly needed to hear the *Resident Aliens* message. We knew from firsthand experience that the black church had long known how to be resident aliens in a racist world.

We predicted that the church will come to resemble more closely the synagogue, and the last two decades have proved us right. While it's true that we are deeply indebted to John Howard Yoder, particularly his *Politics of Jesus*, for sending us down the *Resident Aliens* road, we are more indebted to the church that produced people whose children marched on Birmingham. If it happened then, it could happen today; if God produced a church there, God could do it again here.

We really like the response that the North American church's dispossession is a dispossession for the sake of the world. It isn't so much that mainline Protestantism has been disenfranchised by contemporary American culture; it's that dispossession from the dominant culture is the effect that Jesus Christ has upon anyone who attempts to obey him.

Terms like *resident aliens* and *colony* are only a couple of the offensive terms that early Christians used to describe the peculiar situation in which they found themselves due to Christ's determination to rob Caesar of his power. Being Christian means learning to use Christian language appropriately. We believe that when Christians facilely adopt language

like *rights* or *democracy* or *progressive* or even *liberation* to describe the mission of the church, we attenuate the Christian moral imagination and tame the constant metanoia required of those who think Jesus Christ is Lord—and Caesar (even a democratically elected one) isn't.

What Christ seems to have in mind for us is more abrasive than mere social ethics, more transformative than mere piece-meal transformation of the economy, more demanding even than a struggle to “mitigate privilege and grow in solidarity with nondominant persons.”

We gather from many of the responses that some of our readers still don't want to talk Christology with us. Perhaps they are rightly suspicious that our theological and ecclesial claims are a cover for our social/gender/economic/racial location. While we grant that every theology implies a sociology, we thought *Resident Aliens* was an assertion that Jesus Christ is still the most interesting thing that the church has to say or to do in the world, the truth about us and God. God's peculiar answer to what's wrong with the world is a crucified Jew who lived briefly, died violently, rose unexpectedly, and even now makes life more difficult and out of our control—but so much more interesting than flaccid sociological analysis. We actually believe that racial, class, and gender formations are not as determinative of who we are as what, in baptism, Christ makes of us.

If *Resident Aliens* is a work of ecclesiology, it is a doctrine of the church tied closely to Christology. The church has trouble in the world because of Jesus. For God so loved the world that the Son was sent to the world, but the world has received him not. We wouldn't know that self-sacrificial, nonviolent love is the point of it all without him.

To those who take offense that we spoke of the church's vocation in terms of being “aliens” and a “colony,” we simply say that it was Paul's terminology before it was ours. The question is not simply how we can change the world to make life a bit less miserable for the marginalized but rather how the church humbly can learn to be more faithful from those who were forced by the world (and sometimes by the church) to be aliens.

We suspect there is among some readers in the now dramatically diminished Protestant mainline the lingering hope that if

we just get our politics a bit more to the left, a bit more “progressive” as some define progress, still hoping for some culturally acceptable social utility for the church, some transformationist impact to make America a better place, we will have a future.

We agree that finding ourselves as resident aliens amid various forms of Augustine's earthly city demands an array of responses from the church, based upon the particular cultural context and the claims of the gospel. We find it difficult to understand how someone might think we had taken a “fundamentally dismissive stance with respect to political society.” Those who suggest that we are recommending a retreat or dreaded sectarian isolationism seem to us as if they are willfully misreading both the book and us. The exact opposite is the case.

## Some readers still don't want to talk about Christology.

We both have had lots to say about politics in the earthly city, and we are both very political people, for good and ill. Besides, we are members of a university faculty and have held various positions in local churches; everyone knows how bloody politics can be in the church and the academy.

Therefore we like the notion that Christians are called to “calculated ambivalence and cultivated aloofness tempered by ad hoc evaluations about selective collaborations for the common good.” We reject the idea, implied by some of our readers, that North American Christians can let the world define what counts as politics and meaningful social change. Throughout the book we tried to reiterate that it's not just a question of whether to be resident aliens, but how.

Again we say: when Christians are asked to say something political, we say *church*. The reason we say *church* is that the church for all its limits is where we have some hope of being a people who do not lie to one another.

If *Resident Aliens* has a bottom line, it is that the hidden violence intrinsic to our manipulative relations with one another that are so often identified as “love” can only be named and transformed by a people capable of telling one another the truth. Of all people, Christians should be capable of truth-telling, trained as we are Sunday after Sunday to confess we were there when they crucified the One who is truth itself.

A couple of the respondents are right: now is the time to stress *residency* as much as we once stressed christologically imposed alienation. We rejoice in the evidence that our little book was used by God for the production of a few Christians who refused either to be silenced or to translate our claims into more acceptable sociological platitudes. We are humbled that after reading *Resident Aliens* some once-disheartened churchpeople put the book down and gained new enthusiasm for the odd way that Christ takes up residency among us, people who are able to say to various disbelieving, deadly presumptuous empires, “we are not going anywhere.”



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by Carol Zaleski

## To pray the news

LATELY THERE'S BEEN too much death—in faraway places from terrorism, epidemics, hate crimes, honor killings, war; in our own cities from drugs, gang warfare, domestic strife, suicide, arson, accident; and in all places (there is nowhere to hide) from the long list of causes we deem natural. One of our closest friends died in mid-July after a three-year struggle with cancer; we returned from his funeral in England to find that another friend, a 98-year-old nun, had died peacefully the previous day. Our neighbors' cat died—"He's up in the sky where God is," their small daughter told us as she brought us next door to show us not the sky where God is, but the newly dug grave in the backyard. And though the loss of an aged cat weighs comparatively little, this particular loss has planted in an innocent young mind the seed that will one day grow into what some psychologists call "middle knowledge" of the reality of death.

How much of this middle knowledge is good for us? St. Benedict said we should keep death daily before our eyes. But Benedict could scarcely have imagined a time when death would be placed daily before our eyes, not by deep reflection but by shallow projection on flickering screens, gazed at unprepared.

Because these flickering screens are omnipresent, the news of death is never far away. Because I am never far from a computer, I've slipped into the habit of reading news aggregators. Not surprisingly, Google News comes up first whenever I Google "news"—and its aggregated content is overwhelmingly about death, death delivered in graphic detail, death awareness in a form that is anything but good for the soul.

A case could be made that—aside from those at the front lines, such as members of the armed forces, police officers, first responders, medical missionaries, journalists at risk, funeral professionals, and end-of-life caregivers—we should ration our exposure to death. Unless our job or calling brings us into daily contact with death and disaster (I cannot presume to advise the real heroes nor claim to understand how they cope), we need to know only enough to enable us to serve in whatever capacity we are capable of serving.

A case could be made that, whatever our job or calling, we would all do better to avoid media that portray our human story as essentially about violence, conflict, and death. For the truism is true: bad news, alarming news, grotesque news, is the news that sells, and when aggregated it loses all sense of proportion. In our local communities and families, if we are lucky enough to live in the world's pockets of peace and security, we hear news of births as well as deaths with roughly equal interest, even if not in the

ratio we would desire. In the media, by contrast, the only births that count are the strange, the celebrated, or the untimely.

There are self-help gurus who advise us to give up reading the news altogether. I read an op-ed recently that listed in attention-grabbing bullet points five reasons why reading the news is bad for one's health, creativity, mental acuity, and prosperity. But the proposed cure—to ignore the news altogether—strikes me as too extreme, too self-absorbed, and a very poor return to make for the gift of a free press. Assuming we wish to realize in some meaningful way our connection to other human beings on this planet, there has to be a better way.

And I believe there is a better way. Perhaps it is simple common sense, but I find it lived out most fully in monasteries where the sons and daughters of St. Benedict live a life of prayer. With every reading of the Rule, with every meditation on the passion of Christ, with every recitation of the necrology, with the whole daily and yearly round of observances for the dead, monks and nuns are schooled in the remembrance of

### How much knowledge of death is good for us?

death. They also read the newspapers, or inform themselves by other means about the catastrophes and cruelties that disfigure our world. Living in hope of the real paradise, they have no wish to inhabit a fool's paradise. Yet they are equally schooled in the practice of restraint when it comes to the media—which ideally means not dwelling upon horrific details, indulging in mere gossip, or expressing opinions about economic and geopolitical factors that are largely beyond our ken.

The monastic tradition, which has had over 1,500 years to get this right, has a pretty good sense of what it is we really need to know about world affairs—namely, just enough to enable us to pray, to serve, and to grieve within proper measure (not like those who have no hope: 1 Thess. 4:13), without vain curiosity. To pray the news rather than passively to read it—to place oneself within the web of intercession and fellowship where all the news of this fallen world should be aggregated—strikes me as the broad path of sanity and balance, and a sound Christian practice. It's worth a try, in any case, if the only other options are news-obsession or world-rejection.

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Carol Zaleski is professor of world religions at Smith College.

## Creation *ex amore*

by Ted Peters

IAN A. McFARLAND

This is a book about nothing. Nothing limits God. Nothing exists apart from God. Creation is grounded in nothing but God. That's a lot to say about nothing.

Ian McFarland, professor of theology and associate dean of faculty and academic affairs at Emory's Candler School of Theology, defends the classic Christian teaching that God creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. His defense does not depend on scripture, which is ambiguous on this question. Rather, he contends that *creatio ex nihilo* makes dogmatic, or doctrinal, sense.

Note the present tense: God creates. Our term *creation* does not refer to an origin back in the book of Genesis or at the Big Bang. Rather, God's action of creating the world out of nothing is ongoing, contemporary, continuing (*creatio continua*). "It seems to me that the Christian doctrine of creation is only marginally concerned with the question of the world's temporal origin. Far more fundamentally, the doctrine of creation from nothing is a proposal about the character of God's relationship to the world."

I refer to this position as a constitutional account of creation out of nothing, rather than a temporal account. In both the temporal and constitutional accounts the same point is made: the created world is totally dependent on God for its existence. Thomas Aquinas, on whom McFarland depends for much of his doctrinal reflection, ascribes the constitutional account to philosophy and the temporal account to scripture. Similarly, McFarland draws most of his argumentation from dogmatic deliberation rather than biblical exegesis.

Our creating God is trinitarian. The Father creates through the Son in the Spirit. God's internal relationality (*perichoresis*) is extended beyond the divine life to creatures whom God brings into existence as an act of grace and love. McFarland writes:

Interpreted Christologically, the claim that nothing limits God is not primarily a claim about God's power over the creature and still less about God's independence from creation. On the contrary, its focus is God's freedom to enter into creation in order to bind created life to God from within by making it nothing less than God's own life.

Like many classical trinitarian theists during the final third of the last century, McFarland places the historical activity of creation within the trinitarian life of God. All of this is well and good. Yet we must attend to a bear market on the theological stock exchange. The price of creation out of nothing is falling. Modern creatures do not like the idea of total dependence on a single all-powerful God, so they are buying stock in assertions of creaturely efficacy, if not co-creatorship with the divine.

Some feminist theologians object to the doctrine of creation out of nothing as a product of patriarchy's image of God as male—as emphasizing discontinuity between God and creation. In contrast, applying the image of a mother giving birth would provide a substitute idea of God that emphasizes continuity between creator and creation. Similarly, eco-theologians object to creation out of nothing because it desacralizes planet

**From Nothing:  
A Theology of Creation**  
By Ian A. McFarland  
Westminster John Knox, 232 pp.,  
\$35.00 paperback

Earth, just at a time when we humans should be revering and caring for the divine matrix that gives and sustains life. In addition, Whiteheadian process theologians, who advocate panentheism, repudiate creation out of nothing because it allegedly sponsors an image of God as arbitrary, distant, uninvolved, uncaring, and even tyrannical. All three of these divestments in creation out of nothing share one complaint in common: *creatio ex nihilo* so separates the Creator God from the creation that creatures feel either dominated or abandoned.

McFarland does not address all of these divestments in detail. Yet he does defend *creatio ex nihilo* from process theology's "claim that creation from nothing renders God arbitrary." McFarland objects to the Whiteheadian process school for two reasons: first, it subjects God to a more comprehensive metaphysical scheme, and second, it denies God sovereignty over creation. But this merely reiterates the classical position without a detailed counterargument. What McFarland needs to say with greater force and clarity is that the God of creation out of nothing invests the divine self in a creation whose very existence is the product of divine grace and love. McFarland

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comes close: "It is in Christ that creation is revealed as a matter of grace alone, and thus as grounded solely in God's love."

McFarland's explication of creation out of nothing presents the classic theistic position. *From Nothing* would make an excellent textbook for students of theology, and I recommend it to that readership. Even so, two items are missing: a more extensive examination of contemporary natural science and a more ontological analysis of the eschatological new creation.

First, science. McFarland offers two very brief, though insightful, references to current scientific conversation, one to indeterminism in quantum physics and the other to the question of progress within evolutionary theory. But overall, McFarland believes that scientific knowledge and Christian reflection on creation have nothing to say to one another. I particularly regret his assertion that his position is "completely unaffected by the scientific question of whether or not (let alone when) the world had a temporal beginning."

But a lively debate is currently taking place in science over the Big Bang as a singularity, the edge of time, the possible existence of multiple universes, fine tuning the anthropic principle, and so on. In addition, the new movement in our universities known as Big History, partially funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is trying to supplant religious stories of origin with its own sci-

tific story of origin. A cultural contest is raging over the concept of the universe and its relation to whatever might lie beyond. The world outside the church is badly in need of informed and sophisticated engagement on what we Christians call creation. McFarland unnecessarily sequesters his Christian reflection in a church library just when it should be called out into the public square.

Second, eschatological ontology. When we look at the biblical symbols we find creation juxtaposed with new creation. Origin and destiny belong together. The new creation fulfills yet goes beyond the first creation. McFarland recognizes this dimly, but he does not fully explicate the retroactive significance of the new creation for the initial genesis. In my theological judgment, the new creation defines the first creation while it reveals what has always been the case—that God's design, goal, end, and promise appear within the present creation in anticipation of its eschatological renew-

al. God will not have completed the divine creative work until the new creation—the transformed creation—is instantiated.

With so much to say about nothing, let me add something. Nothing is the nonbeing into which the passing creation falls as God draws the present moment into the being of the divinely granted future. The power of being is found in God's futurity, I believe, and God's future makes the present moment possible while liberating our present from the determinism of the past. By dropping the present into the nonbeing of the past, God liberates the present moment for creative thrusts toward what is new, toward what is transformative. To be is to have a future. God began creation by giving it a future. Creation's story began with a beginning, an alpha, and it will have a conclusion, an omega. *From Nothing* tells us about the present moment in creation without reference to either alpha or omega.

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Dr. Lauren Winner is Assistant Professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School. Books she has authored include *Mudhouse Sabbath* and *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity*, and her memoir, *Girl Meets God* has been described as "a passionate and thoroughly engaging account of a continuing spiritual journey within two profoundly different faiths."

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## **White Elephants on Campus: The Decline of the University Chapel in America, 1920–1960**

By Margaret M. Grubiak

University of Notre Dame Press, 184 pp.,  
\$28.00 paperback

The University of Chicago—a Baptist institution—began construction of its enormous Gothic cathedral of a chapel in 1926, ensuring that it could hold the entire student body for religious services, but in the midst of the multiyear construction project, the university stopped requiring chapel attendance. Princeton University—Presbyterian—began construction of its own massive chapel in 1925 during a decline of interest in mandatory chapel and a crisis of faith prompted largely by the heartbreaking losses of the Great War. Meanwhile, Congregationalist Yale opted not to replace its smaller, Victorian Battell

Chapel with a triumphalist Gothic structure but rather to build that ecclesiastical and architectural musculature into its new Sterling Memorial Library, hence creating a “new cathedral” responsible for the “reshaping of religion.” Unitarian Harvard, in the meantime, replaced a 19th-century chapel that had geographically faced off with, and lost to, the Widener Library with the hopefully more impressive and architecturally aggressive neocolonial Memorial Church.

In *White Elephants on Campus*, architectural historian Margaret M. Grubiak examines the changing role of religion within certain elite American universities and colleges and concludes that because these institutions’ core missions and identities are no longer religious, their magnificent chapels and other religiously informed structures have become white elephants. They were built to ensure that religion would remain central to the university’s mission, and the project failed. The buildings are now

irrelevant, financially burdensome, and outdated in design and purpose. Harvard’s Memorial Church, for instance, can “be conceived as a desiccated symbol.”

Today when university presidents are asked about the mission of their institutions, many say something to the effect of “producing knowledge” and “creating public servants,” both of which are wonderful but seem to have little to do with gorgeous, monumental, architecturally significant university chapels, libraries, and classroom buildings. But even if training ministers is no longer an institutional priority of historically Protestant universities, can’t the schools continue to use ecclesiastical architecture to inspire faith and convey that learning is a holy endeavor? Of course they can.

Large chapels and similarly designed buildings continually incur enormous maintenance costs. The white elephant chapels with which I’m familiar were provided with endowments at the time of their construction to ensure that the buildings would never cost their parent institutions a dime. In one case a university reinterpreted a chapel endowment to mean that significant portions of its annual payout should go to other departments that support the building, like facilities, grounds, and public safety. That chapel is not a white elephant but a cash cow.

And then there is the question of these buildings’ interface with the public. Regular self-audits by universities show that chapels are a top campus destination for visitors. Second only to campus stadiums, the magnificent chapels and the other astounding learning spaces on which this book focuses are major draws for worshipers, tourists, scholars, bibliophiles, and music and art lovers. This is what the structures’ builders had hoped for all along, and why they built them to be destinations.

None of the universities Grubiak studies continues to require chapel attendance, but that doesn’t make the buildings useless. The time of mandatory chapel was never a golden age: she notes the bad behavior of forced worshipers.

Reviewed by Alison L. Boden, dean of religious life and the chapel at Princeton University.



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Rather, today's chapels are inhabited by people who truly want to be there. Religious interest and participation have been rising on campuses since the early 1990s after a 20-year dip and have yet to crest. The chapels now host the rituals of a number of religious communities. Hindus celebrate Diwali, Muslims hold Jummah prayer, Buddhists meditate, and Catholics consecrate side chapels, all in addition to the historic Protestant campus ministries' presence.

The great religious spaces have continued to flourish because they have been kept relevant to their institutions' changing religious demographics. Rather than covering the icons in their stained glass windows with velvet curtains, these white elephants have decided not to deny their Protestant heritage but to embrace it. The goal is not to eliminate the school's religious roots but to acknowledge them as the historical starting point of a place of welcome and engagement with equals.

As Grubiak notes, the massive chapels built during the fat 1920s represented university administrators' attempts to reinforce the notion that religion was a positive and eternal force even as religion's place in society and the academy was in transition. The Princeton University chapel inhabits this dialogue. Its north balcony window depicts Job at the depths of his suffering, sitting on a dung heap and scraping his boils with potsherds. The south window depicts him after his gracious restoration. The message to the first viewers of the windows was crystal clear: although you have lost beloved classmates, brothers, and sons in the war, although you will never truly recover their presence or your old faith, although mustard gas and slaughter tell you that there can't be a god, keep coming here—keep coming back to this space, because restoration from the deepest of pits is possible through God and God alone.

The white elephants still speak to us. They call us back. They don't let us go. They are packed with life that their builders both desperately hoped for and never imagined. They actually are not white elephants but vibrant, elegant, and cherished portals of mystery, intellect, beauty, and yes—faith.

**Gaza: A History**  
By Jean-Pierre Filiu  
Oxford University Press, 440 pp., \$29.95

How begin to describe the Gaza Strip, which came into existence with the 1948 war—the War of Independence for Israelis and the *nakba*, or catastrophe, for Palestinians?

As I write this review, the Israeli military has begun a ground offensive into Gaza following days of Israeli aerial bombardment and rocket fire from Hamas and other Palestinian fighters. Many Israelis view Gaza as a hotbed of terrorism to be cordoned off and battered into submission, while for many Palestinians Gaza represents a six-decade-long disaster but also Palestinian endurance and resistance.

A fuller description of the Gaza Strip must go beyond the spectacular violence of the present moment. One could begin with basic geographic and demographic facts: the Gaza Strip has one of the world's highest population densities and one of the world's fastest growing populations, with over 1.8 million people living in a 141-square-mile territory (25 miles long and between four and seven miles wide), bounded by Egypt, the state of Israel, and the Mediterranean Sea, which is patrolled by the Israeli military. One could highlight Gaza's rich history, underscoring its strategic location next to the sea and its role as a key stopping point for caravans traveling between Egypt and the Arabian peninsula. One could stress that Gaza has been shaped over the centuries by Egyptian, Philistine, Byzantine, Crusader, and Islamic civilizations and could point to architectural gems like the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Porphyry, the Great Omari Mosque, and the still-functioning 14th-century bathhouse, Hamam al-Sammara. One could describe various aspects of Gaza's vibrant cultures, as Laila El-Haddad has done in her delightful cook-

Reviewed by Alain Epp Weaver, who lived and worked for two years in the Gaza Strip and is the author of *Mapping Exile and Return: Palestinian Dispossession and a Political Theology for a Shared Future* (Fortress).

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# NOTES FROM THE GLOBAL CHURCH

"What happens when you look at Christianity outside its Euro-American framework?

"That question becomes pressing when we look at numerical changes in the churches today—when, for instance, we realize that Africa will soon be home to the largest population of Christian believers on the planet.

"Although I describe my area of study as Global Christianity, that's a flawed phrase: if it's not global, is it really Christianity?"



Philip Jenkins's *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* is a landmark book for understanding contemporary global history. Publishers Weekly called it "a clarion call for anyone interested in the future of Christianity."

Philip Jenkins writes Notes from the Global Church for the *Christian Century*.

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book/ethnography *The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey*.

Or one could adopt the approach taken by Jean-Pierre Filiu, professor of Middle East studies at the Paris School of International Affairs at France's Sciences Po, and focus on Gaza's central role in the Palestinian national movement, especially after 1948. In *Gaza: A History*, Filiu offers a helpful corrective to narratives of Palestinian nationalism and resistance that focus on the West Bank or the Palestinian diaspora. Filiu reminds us that by the end of the 1948 war, the newly created Gaza Strip had become home to one quarter of the Palestinian population of the Palestine Mandate. Refugees had been driven into the Strip from their former dwellings in the Naqab desert, coastal towns like al-Majdal and Asdud, and even as far afield as Galilee. Today over two-thirds of the Gaza Strip's inhabitants are refugees registered with the United Nations, with many of those refugees living in the Strip's eight UN-operated refugee camps. Gaza is starkly representative of how the experience of exile has shaped Palestinian identity.

The core of Filiu's study is divided into three sections. In the first, "The Age of Mourning," Filiu examines the Palestinian resistance that coalesced in Gaza's refugee camps in the wake of the *nakba*. In the second section, "The Crushed Generation," he looks at how Palestinians in Gaza adjusted to Israel's military occupation of the Strip, and in the third, "The Generation of the Intifadas," he considers Gaza's leading role in the first intifada, the formation of the Palestinian National Authority in the wake of the Oslo Accords and its "Gaza-Jericho First" approach, and the outbreak of the second intifada as the hopes of the Oslo peace process crumbled.

Filiu's history of Gaza has several strengths, first and foremost his focused insistence on moving Gaza from the margins to the center of Palestinian history. Filiu also capably narrates the roots of Palestinian Islamism in the Gaza Strip, explaining how today's Hamas emerged from the Mujamma founded by Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in the early 1970s as a competitor to the Palestine Liberation Organization's secular-nationalist polities, embodied by Fatah and various left-

ist parties. And he helpfully describes the shifting tensions between secular nationalism and Islamism within the Palestinian national movement.

Filiu's study suffers from a failure to let Gazans speak for themselves. He quotes very few Gazans directly or indirectly, whether from archival material such as newspapers and memoirs or from oral interviews. Although he does a fine job of narrating history as a succession of events, material presenting Gazans in their own words would have added depth and texture to his account.

One other way to describe the Gaza Strip is to view it as emblematic of the Israeli state's territorial, military, and economic strategies. Filiu touches on this approach in his introductory and concluding chapters. He cites Harvard political scientist Sara Roy's analysis of Israel's politics of "de-development" in the Gaza Strip from 1967 onward, with Gazans becoming both a source of cheap labor and a captive market for

Israeli products. This lasted until Israel began shifting away from its dependence on Palestinian day labor and toward reliance on temporary foreign workers from East Asia and elsewhere.

The Oslo-era dream of Gaza becoming an "Asian tiger" has long since dissolved: the United Nations estimates that nearly 1 million Gazans rely on food aid, and Israel's stringent and punitive control over Gaza's borders renders any real economic development impossible. Filiu notes that the Gaza Strip is routinely described as the world's largest open-air prison, a description that is difficult to argue with after one has passed through the militarized checkpoint apparatus at the Erez Crossing, the northern entrance to the Strip.

In these instances, Gaza is not unique but is emblematic of the experience of the Occupied Palestinian Territories as a whole since 1967. According to Israeli political theorist Adi Ophir, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank alike have been



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subject to a rule of “inclusive exclusion.” They have been included territorially and economically within sovereign Israeli control but excluded politically as Israel has pursued a policy of “maximum land, minimum Arabs.” As Israeli colonization has expanded and accelerated over the past four decades, the zones to which Palestinians are confined and the movement among those zones have become increasingly restricted, thanks to Israeli-only roads, a network of checkpoints, and separation walls and militarized fences. This territorial fragmentation, not surprisingly, has gone hand in hand with Palestinian political fragmentation. Gaza is simply an extreme example of these trends.

Few Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land visit the Gaza Strip. The Israeli military, which controls entrance into Gaza, tightly limits entry, having decided that there are no valid pilgrimage or tourism reasons to visit Gaza. Many Christian communions around the world support and advocate for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but an unflinching look at Israel’s territorial fragmentation of the Occupied Territories, with Gaza’s enforced isolation being an extreme example, should raise serious questions about whether a two-state solution to the conflict remains possible. The future to which Gaza’s present reality points is bleak.

Hope, it would seem, is in short supply. Yet spend some time with Gazans like the workers at the Near East Council of Churches in Gaza City or with women who organize after-school clubs for children and youth in Khan Younis, and you will come away impressed and moved by the resilience of people living under such harsh conditions. Or spend time with Israeli peace-building organizations like Zochrot and New Profile and you will see alternatives to militarism, dispossession, and revenge. Studies like Filiu’s are valuable for underscoring the grim severity of the present situation and for recounting the history that produced it. But hope for the future is in Palestinians’ and Israelis’ patient and determined work toward a politics that is not captive to the violent strategies of separation and partition that have created the human disaster gripping Gaza.

## The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World

By Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu  
HarperOne, 240 pp., \$25.99

When Dan and Lynn Wagner received the parole officer’s letter, they had a critical decision to make. Lisa, the woman who had killed their two daughters in an accident while driving drunk and high, was about to be released from prison. In order to continue their own healing and bring closure, the Wagners decided to meet with Lisa. They fully expected to release the relationship and move on, but a completely unexpected thing happened. “When we walked into the meeting room and laid our eyes on Lisa for the first time, we both hugged her,” Dan said. “I don’t know why, but it suddenly seemed as if we had all been through this war together. In that hug and in my heart I felt a sense of relief. We walked into that building in fear, thinking we were finally going to have an end. But it turned out to be a beginning.” Following that meeting, Lynn and Lisa traveled to jails, churches, and universities across the United States to share their story—to be living examples of how forgiveness transforms one’s pain.

The Wagners’ story is but one powerful testimony to the healing power of forgiveness and to our capacity to forgive. Through stories like these, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Anglican priest Mpho Tutu, equip us to answer some of our deepest questions: How can I forgive? How can I become a whole person once again, freed from the harm I experienced or inflicted? How can I live into a new story for my life? Both authors in this dynamic and compelling team bring testimony to heinous crimes they’ve witnessed and experienced in South Africa and across the globe.

There are scads of books on forgiveness, and this is not Desmond Tutu’s first on the topic. In *No Future Without Forgiveness* (2000), he highlights his iconic work as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. But *The Book of Forgiving* is markedly different. Rather

than a memoir or reflection, it is a useful how-to handbook that helps us wade through a profoundly complex topic. The book is a tool for applying forgiveness in daily life.

Interspersing their recommendations with personal narratives, the Tutus move us through a fourfold path that’s universal and practical: tell the story, name the hurt, grant forgiveness, and renew or release the relationship. At the end of each chapter they present numerous tangible opportunities for application, from prayer and guided meditation to journaling and conducting rituals with a stone. Believing that we cannot let go of feelings we don’t claim, the Tutus create a safe space to enter into and face our rawest emotions.

The basic truths undergirding the forgiveness model are simple but extremely challenging: there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of or beyond forgiveness. In spite of Mpho’s horrific memory of seeing her murdered housekeeper’s body, and in spite of the barrage of violence her father has faced in his lifetime, they both assert that there are no monsters, only monstrous acts. We are human beings, intimately connected with one another, who became separated from our goodness. We need a process of forgiveness that returns us to our core. “Our nature is goodness,” they write. “If it were not, then we would not be shocked and dismayed when we harm one another.”

One of the biggest strengths of the book, in addition to its practicality, is its holistic approach. While forgiveness is a central practice in many faith traditions—and the Tutus point to Christ on the cross as their model—the authors push us beyond spiritual motivations to forgive to physical, moral, and relational reasons. Equally important is the Tutus’ effort to dispel the myths of forgiveness. It is not a subversion of justice, a denial of the harm, or a forgetting of the event. It is not an airy-fairy act of the saintly, but a matter of gritty reality.

While the Tutus’ presentation of the four steps encompass the majority of the

Reviewed by Arianne Braithwaite Lehn, a minister at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Wayne, Indiana.

book, later chapters are just as significant. They focus on how to use the model when you are the one asking forgiveness and when you must forgive yourself—both relevant for freeing yourself from a fruitless endeavor to change the past.

Many of the book's true stories are extraordinary—the family who reconciles with the drunk driver who killed two of their children, a mother who meets with the terrorists in Mumbai who killed her daughter and husband, and forgiveness of hate crimes following South Africa's apartheid. With such remarkable examples, it can be difficult to think of the small, daily acts of forgiveness we need, and yet that's where the rubber meets the road for most of us. I want to know how to forgive the coworker I struggle to trust and my spouse when he disappoints me, or how to ask forgiveness of the friend I slighted many years ago but will never see again. These are seemingly small interactions, but ones that make up our lives. Although the Tutus do not put everyday examples front and center, they do occasionally lift them up, particularly those related to raising children, which the archbishop likens to "training for a forgiveness marathon." End-of-chapter exercises are critical, providing space for readers to reflect on their own lives.

I appreciate the book's nuance and openness. A four-step model initially sounded too clear-cut, but the Tutus acknowledge that forgiveness is not a simple and streamlined process. There is

no timetable, and one can travel the forgiveness cycle multiple times. They nod to Nelson Mandela, who they say needed 27 years to be transformed from an angry, unforgiving person into the model of reconciliation and forgiveness he became. And just as the process is not tidy, neither is the outcome. Forgiveness is always a venture into unknown territory.

Although we cannot know the end result in advance, entering into the forgiveness journey is always worth it. The person who wounded us may never repent, and the person we harmed might never forgive us, yet that's not necessary for our healing. We forgive for ourselves, regardless of how those around us respond. The book lists apology websites ([www.perfectapology.com](http://www.perfectapology.com) and [www.joeapology.com](http://www.joeapology.com)) where one can write an anonymous letter to a victim or perpetrator, as well as the Apology Line phone number in the United States (347-201-2446). When we grant or ask forgiveness, we take back ownership of our fate and feelings, freeing ourselves from an endless, binding cycle of bitterness. It is a deeply empowering thing for broken and beautiful people—all of us.

The Tutus remind us that we *can* forgive and that it's the greatest gift we can give ourselves. We are more than the sum of our hurts, and in healing our own lives we will heal our world. We hold the keys to our own freedom; this book shows us how to use them.

## BookMarks

### The Drama of Living: Becoming Wise in the Spirit

By David F. Ford

Brazos Press, 240 pp., \$19.99, paperback

A sequel to Ford's *The Shape of Living*, *The Drama of Living* could be characterized as sapiential theology—reflection on theology that draws out its wisdom for daily living. Ford weaves together a mélange of sources, especially the Gospel of John and the poetry of his friend Michael O'Siadhail. A corollary to the theme of Jesus coming into the world is John's theology of the Spirit who comes and invites us into the ongoing, improvisational drama of following Jesus and living out the love of Jesus in our lives. A familiar theme for Ford is sounded in this book: the urgent need and opportunities for interreligious understanding and cooperation. Religious traditions at their best are about the pursuit and application of wisdom.

### Red, Brown ,Yellow, Black, White—Who's More Precious in God's Sight? A Call for Diversity in Christian Missions and Ministry

By Leroy Barber (with Velma Maia Thomas)

Jericho Books, 224 pp., \$24.00

Racism in missions didn't end with colonialism. Barber shows how it continues to persist, especially in urban missions. People of color in missions are often not given positions of authority. When they have their own mission organizations, they are often deprived of funding. Racism and classism surface especially when white suburban congregations do trips in urban areas. These and other examples of racism undermine what mission is about, which is to represent God's rule on earth. Barber draws on Martin Luther King Jr. and Howard Thurman to point a way forward for people of all colors to embody God's reign in mission. Barber, executive director of Word Made Flesh Ministries and board chair of the Christian Community Development Association, draws largely on his own experience in urban mission.

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## The Giver's temptations

**T**he Community's chief elder, played by a steely Meryl Streep, utters the film's decisive line: "When people have the freedom to choose, they choose wrong." Her eyes, locked on the viewer, are impossible to ignore. The questions behind that line—the moral wrestling, the tortured ethical calculus, the ambiguity, and the clarity—make for a fine movie. *The Giver* is the purest form of dystopian narrative, distilled to its most essential elements: power, choice, and the striving for human perfection gone wrong. It's like an O. Henry story for the hot young adult fiction market.

In this postapocalyptic world the Community is everything. The hero, Jonas (Brenton Thwaites), is likable, earnest, and naive and a contrast to the recent wave of female action heroines—*The Hunger Games*'s Katniss and *Divergent*'s Tris. Jonas seems much younger than those heroines, and his drama—true to the rest of the story—is less martial and more interior. The fighter planes and chase scenes seem meant only to keep the film from growing too dreamy.

The film is based on Lois Lowry's novel of the same title, which won the Newbery Medal in 1994. Perhaps the making of a movie version had to wait for the current revival of interest in dystopias.

On an appointed day, teens in the Community leave their childhoods behind and are assigned jobs based on their talents and interests. Jonas wonders what he will do. He's not like his friend Fiona (Odeya Rush), whose affinity for caring for infants has made childcare an obvious choice. Jonas is surprised when he finds himself apprenticed to the mysterious Giver (Jeff Bridges), who will train

Jonas to take over his position. Jonas's job will be to receive and keep the memories of humanity.

The Community eschews individuality in favor of a quiet but totalitarian "Sameness" meant to keep everyone safe. In the novel Jonas narrates, "Our people made that choice, the choice to go to Sameness. Before my time, before the previous time." Jonas will receive memories of the Community—memories of all that no longer exists there, memories of differences that his radically egalitarian community has swept away as it embraces its focus on Sameness. The memories will help him advise the Community.

As he begins his training as the Giver, Jonas receives beautiful things and does so with delight. The film manages to translate some of the numinous quality of the novel, making nice use of the contrast between the black-and-white world of the Community and the new world that opens up to Jonah—a world of color. He alone among his friends can see the red of an apple. As Jonas narrates, "We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with difference. We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others."

His apprenticeship becomes less beautiful as he experiences memories of pain, violence, and war. He also learns hard things about the Giver's previous apprentice (a cameo by Taylor Swift), about his father's work, and about the mechanisms the Community uses to preserve Sameness. When Jonas learns that a vulnerable member of the Community is threatened, he makes a choice for change, and the Giver tries to strengthen him with memories of other people who have stood up to evil.



**THE HERO:** Jonas (Brenton Thwaites) is chosen to receive and keep the memories of humanity.

If ever a movie with a teenage protagonist was tailor-made for sermon illustrations, it is *The Giver*. Theodicy and freedom, difference and sameness, individuality and community—all play important roles. I've never reviewed a film that I could so easily mold in any theological direction. I could use it to write a prolific riff or a feminist critique. I could hone in on the Community's decision to erase religion and critique the assumption that religiosity necessitates violence. I could use it to write about sinful distortions of community and a grand theological vision of human freedom. I could muse on eschatological longings and the way that kingdoms go wrong when we try to force the kingdom by human fiat.

The film seems made for our moral use. But the flexibility and nuance of this pretty parable call us to resist that temptation. Inasmuch as the film does something real that is moral, it resists moralism. I'm not suggesting that all art is or should be useless. But our ham-fisted attempts to use such works may violate the gentleness of this story and interfere with the quiet, ruminative work such stories do as they simmer in our moral imaginations.

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*The author is Beth Felker Jones, who teaches theology at Wheaton College in Illinois.*

by Philip Jenkins

For a century, cinema has been a critical medium for presenting religious themes in mainstream culture. Though such efforts are in danger of being swamped by Hollywood megaproductions like this year's *Noah*, which set stunning commercial records around the world—including in Russia, South Korea, Mexico, and Brazil—there are filmmakers who find a distinctive religious voice.

By far the most significant religious film of recent years is Xavier Beauvois's *Of Gods and Men*, a 2010 French production which portrays the Trappist monks who stubbornly maintained their presence in Algeria until jihadi guerrillas murdered seven of

in their presentations of staunch Christian heroism in the face of tyranny and terror. Far more common, though, are visions of faith as a source of conflict. Lebanon offered a wry example in the 2011 *Where Do We Go Now?* —a production that looks all the more relevant in light of later sectarian confrontations. The setting is a village bitterly divided between Maronite Christians and Shi'ite Muslims, where the slightest mishap threatens to provoke all-out interfaith warfare. Maintaining a tenuous peace depends on two good friends, the Christian priest and the

the authorities expel her from the convent, forcing her to seek faith in unlikely settings. At one point, she seems destined to become a Muslim suicide bomber. It seems that for many secular Europeans, only an arbitrary line separates sincere Christian devotion from Islamist violence.

An ultraconservative Catholic prayer group is the subject of the Austrian film *Paradise: Faith* (2012), directed by Ulrich Seidl. Its middle-aged heroine flagellates herself before a crucifix, and on her door-to-door visitations she carries a substantial statue of the Virgin Mary. She

watching these alien believers with about as much sympathy and understanding as they might have for shamanic rites in the Subarctic.

As in the United States, debates over sexual identity cast religious groups firmly on the side of shortsighted repression. In 2012, Romania produced the widely praised *Beyond the Hills*, which was based loosely on an actual case in which a woman died during an exorcism. The film describes the sexual relationship between two young women, one of whom has been forced to become a nun in a stern Orthodox convent under a fanatical authoritarian priest. Her former lover represents insidious forces of Western liberalism and feminism, which the church can only understand as demonic.

I do not wish to paint the picture entirely in bleak colors. In the past decade, Europe has produced some of the finest religious films ever made—not only *Of Gods and Men*, but also the 2006 Russian film *Ostrov (The Island)*—both, incidentally, with monastic settings. I would also note such impressive contributions as the British movie *The Gospel of Us*. But the portrayals of everyday church life, and of Christian religious behavior generally, are consistently tendentious—and depressing.

## Movie portrayals of Christianity tend to be tendentious and depressing.

them in 1996. The film never lapses into hatred for the perpetrators. It is simply one of the greatest and most convincing depictions of sanctity in cinema.

Another portrait of faith in the heroic mode is the 2012 Mexican action epic *Cristiada (For Greater Glory)*, which depicts the Catholic Cristero revolt against the country's aggressively antireligious tyranny in the 1920s. The centerpiece of this reverential work is the story of a true-life martyr, the teenaged rebel José Luis Sánchez.

Those two films stand out

Shi'ite imam, who rely far more on wily cunning than heroism. Perhaps satirical humor is the only way of addressing such grim matters.

Many recent European films depict Christianity very negatively, associating it both with the darkest stereotypes of medieval fanaticism and modern-day radical Islamism. The 2009 French production *Hadewijch* portrays Céline, a young novice who practices extreme asceticism, modeling herself on a 13th-century female visionary named Hadewijch. Céline's acts of self-denial reach the point where

is at best flaky, and at worst an intrusive fanatic. Her estranged former husband is, incidentally, Muslim.

Seidl also made the intriguing documentary *Jesus, You Know* (2003), which observes a group of pious believers praying as they face the camera. The film's general tone is far less harsh than *Paradise: Faith*, and the depictions of the believers' troubled lives are often moving. But as in the later film, the audience is presumed to be

*Notes on the Global Church* appears in every other issue. Philip Jenkins's review of the film *Calvary* appeared in the September 17 issue.

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IN MY FRAILTY, STRENGTHEN.  
IN MY WAITING, REMAIN.

— ELISA COTTRELL



(clockwise from top) *A Prayer of Waiting; Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; Watery Chaos; and Coffee/Maker*, by Paul Soupiset

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*Art selection and comment by Lil Copan, a painter and editor in Boston.*

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